

THE  
IRON DUKE  
OF THE  
METHODIST  
ITINERANCY

---

A. W. PLYLER

WOMAN'S COLLEGE LIBRARY



DUKE UNIVERSITY  
DURHAM, N. C.

Rec'd

*July 5, 1938*

*Mrs. Mary Duke Biddle,*

*donor.*

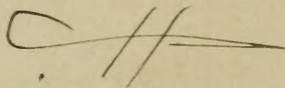
To

Mr. & Mrs. James Buchanan Duke

---

With the compliments and best  
wishes of

Wilbur F. Tillitt



Vanderbilt University.

March 7, 1925-

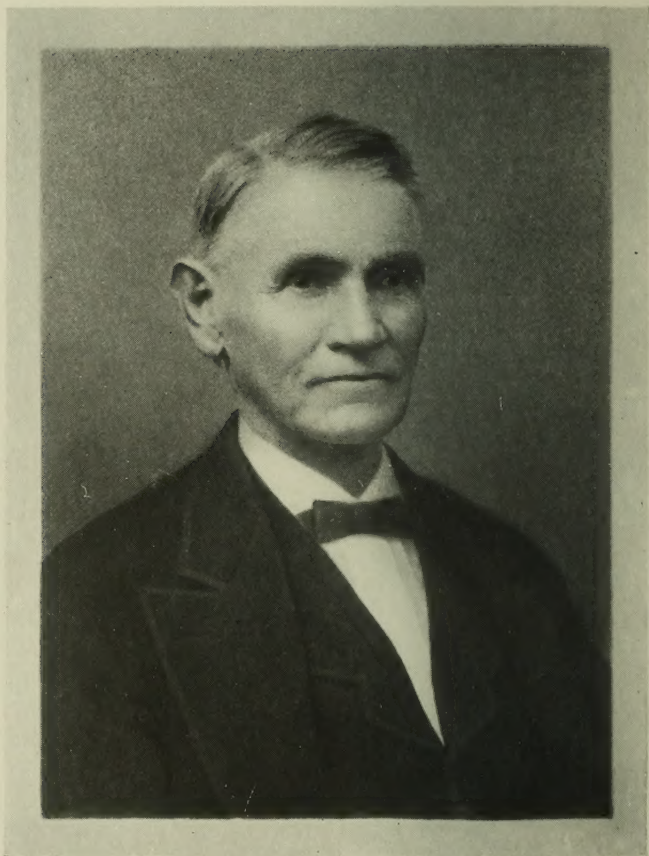
---

( See pages 116-118 )









REV. JOHN TILLET AT SIXTY-TWO YEARS OF AGE

**THE IRON DUKE OF  
THE METHODIST ITINERANCY**





*The*  
" **Iron Duke**  
**OF THE**  
**Methodist Itinerancy**

AN ACCOUNT OF THE  
LIFE AND LABORS OF  
**Reverend John Tillett**  
OF NORTH CAROLINA

---

**By A. W. PLYLER**  
*Editor of the North Carolina Christian Advocate*



NASHVILLE, TENN.  
**COKESBURY PRESS**  
1925

B  
T576P

**COPYRIGHT, 1925**  
**BY**  
**LAMAR & BARTON**

DEDICATED  
To the Old Guard  
of the Methodist Itinerancy  
THE SUPERANNUATED PREACHERS  
OF THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL  
CHURCH, SOUTH

35769





## FOREWORD

JOHN TILLET was the Iron Duke of the Methodist Itinerancy. There was iron in his blood. There was gray matter in his brain, backbone in his body, and courage in his soul beyond what most men had.

He sprang from the loins of a French Huguenot; and into the warp and woof of his moral and physical being there was interwoven the dauntless spirit of those who came through the fires of hell on St. Bartholomew's Day.

He spent his earliest years on the storm-swept coast of North Carolina. His father was a sea captain whose vessels often battled with the waves, where two seas meet, off Hatteras Cape. The son was sometimes on these perilous voyages and was there instilled with the courage and hardihood of sailors who brave ocean storms.

As a young man he was buffeted with adversities of many kinds. He struggled with difficulties in getting an education.

But with every contest he was strengthened and rendered thereby better equipped for future battles.

He said of himself that when a young man *gaudia certaminis*—the delights of actual physical encounters—so obsessed him that he would have been tempted to enter the arena as a pugilist if he had allowed the natural man to dominate his career.

(7)

While the deep religious experience into which he entered subdued his inclination to physical violence, this in no way lessened his delight in moral combat.

Wherever a conflict arose in which the forces of righteousness were arrayed on one side against the forces of evil on the other, there he was always to be found—where the fight was thickest and where the deepest wounds were being inflicted.

One who knew him well said that he was like the war horse—he snuffed the battle from afar.

The thunders of Sinai were music to his ears.

He did not know the word “policy” in his vocabulary. His favorite motto was: “Hew to the line; let the chips fall where they may.”

No Methodist preacher of the nineteenth century was more rigid in enforcing the discipline of the Church irrespective of the wealth or social standing of those who violated its rules.

In a word he was—what we have designated him above—the Iron Duke of the Methodist Itinerancy.

## CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. EARLY YEARS.....	13
II. AT RANDOLPH-MACON COLLEGE.....	27
III. ENTERS THE ITINERANCY.....	47
IV. INNER RELIGIOUS LIFE.....	65
V. THE PROPHET WITH A PASSION FOR RIGHTEOUS- NESS AND A GENIUS FOR DISCIPLINE.....	81
VI. AN EXAMPLE OF HIS METHODS AND HIS PREACHING	95
VII. THE IMPRESS AND IMPACT OF HIS CHARACTER AND HIS PREACHING.....	111
VIII. THE EVANGELISTIC PASTOR.....	133
IX. IN THE CIRCUIT PARSONAGE.....	149
X. AN IMPRESSIVE INCIDENT—LOOKING BACKWARD AND FORWARD.....	181
XI. LOOKING TOWARD THE SUNSET.....	195
XII. LAST DAYS OF THE IRON DUKE.....	205





**I**  
**EARLY YEARS**



# The Iron Duke of The Methodist Itinerancy

---

## I

### EARLY YEARS

JOHN TILLET, son of Isaac Tillett and Anne Tatum Tillett, his second wife, was born in Camden County, North Carolina, November 23, 1812. While he was quite young his father, a sea captain and owner of a vessel engaged in coastwise trade, died and left a fatherless boy to enter at an early age the school of self-reliance and struggle. His mother married a second time, some years after his father's death, and his early years were divided between the home of his mother and that of his guardian. This fact, and the additional fact that his father and mother and brothers all died while he was a comparatively young man, will explain the absence of details as to his early home life which we are accustomed to find in the biography of notably useful men and women.

The lineage of John Tillett is supposed to run back to the French Huguenots, where the name occupies a noteworthy place among those lovers of religious freedom whose annals fill a large and

## 14    *The Iron Duke of the Methodist Itinerancy*

honored place in the history of Protestantism. John Calvin, when driven out of Paris, found a welcome retreat in the home of Louis de Tillet, a nobleman in the south of France, and while there he wrote his "Institutes," published a little later at Basle, Switzerland. The incident in itself serves to put the name high up in the annals of French Protestantism.

To trace a lineal connection between Louis de Tillet, or others bearing this honorable name in France, and John Tillett, of Camden County, North Carolina, has not been attempted hitherto and shall not be by this writer. But the Tilletts unquestionably offer an inviting field for the genealogist, particularly in view of certain outstanding facts and well-defined traits in the life and character of John Tillett—facts and traits that might seem to find their explanation, in part at least, in ancestral forces of preceding generations.

There is reason for believing that the Tillets were among those French Protestants who, being sorely persecuted in France, crossed the Channel and found a Christian welcome and a home in England. Here the name was anglicized by the addition of a letter at the end. From England some of the Tilletts emigrated to America and settled in Southeastern Virginia and Eastern North Carolina.

John Tillett was born and reared about ten miles



from where the Pasquotank River enters Albemarle Sound. The fertility of the soil and the abundant food supplies in the adjoining waters, combined with the slow and easy transportation by sailboat, made life in that community akin to the easy-going sojourn upon tropical isles. To these enervating conditions was added African slavery, John Tillett's father being a slaveholder.

Yet, with his own neighborhood untouched by the breezes of intellectual and commercial awakening that were already stirring in many sections of our growing country, this Camden County lad defies the forces about him and, contrary to the habits of the people of his own community, sets himself to the task of securing an education regardless of the difficulties involved.

His childhood home was in the old Shiloh community, where as early as 1737 had been organized the first Baptist Church in North Carolina, a Church that antedated by almost fifty years the Declaration of American Independence. Yet John Tillett went out from the very shadow of Shiloh Baptist Church to become a Methodist circuit rider, and his circuit and sphere of influence became almost coextensive with the entire State.

Such independence of early environment, combined with a Puritan spirit that qualified him for a place in the front ranks of Oliver Cromwell's

## 16    *The Iron Duke of the Methodist Itinerancy*

"Roundheads," arouses not only an interest in his family tree, but an abiding interest in the man himself. Whence came the iron in the blood of this Puritan and Spartan who shall continue to be known as "The Iron Duke" among those hardy circuit riders that in other days gave added glory to North Carolina Methodism?

The propriety of applying to John Tillett this well-known appellation of the famous Duke of Wellington will not be called in question by anyone who is familiar with the character and life work of this North Carolina itinerant Methodist preacher and who is also familiar with the reason why the hero of Waterloo was designated as "The Iron Duke." The biographer of the Duke of Wellington says: "He had an iron constitution and was not more remarkable for his personal intrepidity than for his moral courage; the union of these qualities obtained for him the appellation 'The Iron Duke,' by which he was affectionately known in later years." An iron constitution, personal intrepidity, and moral courage could not have been more characteristic of the English Duke than they were of the North Carolina itinerant, nor was the Duke more "affectionately known" than was this preacher whom we hesitate not to designate as "The Iron Duke of the Methodist Itinerancy."

At this point seems to be a good place to introduce

a letter that John Tillett, on his return trip from a visit in 1861 to his childhood home in Camden County, wrote his daughter, Laura, who at the time was a student in Greensboro College. His home, at the time, was in Rockingham, Richmond County, but the letter was written from Henderson, the home of his mother-in-law, Mrs. James Wyche.

The letter is as fragrant as the rose and beautiful as an autumnal sunset.

HENDERSON, N. C., December 19, 1861.

*My Dear Laura:* I drop you a few lines that you may know I am on my way home from my trip to Camden. I am glad I went. I secured the legacy left me and was delighted to visit the scenes of my boyhood. I have with me a copy of my father's will, signed by his own hand on his deathbed. The will is dated January 29, 1815. I saw likewise two of the old servants named in the will: Ben, the one given to me; and Isaac, given to my brother William. I was deeply affected, and so were they, at our unexpected meeting this side of eternity. Old man Isaac is nearly a hundred years old, but peart, and his mind apparently unimpaired. I talked to him a long time before I told him who I was. His statement concerning my father's will and the time of his death was corroborated by the will. He seemed to be delighted to see me. I gave him and Ben a dollar apiece, for which they seemed very thankful.

I have with me a few likenesses, among which is that of my oldest brother, Isaac Tillett, who is said, by the old negro, Isaac, to be very much like my father—though another man whom I saw and who knew my father told me that I myself was very much like him.

## 18    *The Iron Duke of the Methodist Itinerancy*

I never felt willing before to have my likeness taken. But having felt the great gratification of seeing the likeness of my brother now so long dead, I cannot deny to my surviving family and friends the gratification that may be derived from seeing my likeness after I am gone to my grave. O that my life may be such that my likeness, seen when I am on earth no more, may urge my surviving children to desire to meet me in heaven.

My love to my dear Nettie.

Your affectionate

PAPA.

One of the two brothers to whom he alludes in this letter was swallowed up in a waterspout in Albemarle Sound, a mode of death which made a vivid and lasting impression upon John, the youngest of the three.

The foregoing letter, written at the age of forty-nine, when the predominating characteristics of a man's life have already become fully established, shows clearly that strong family ties combined with high and holy ideals were the controlling forces in the life and character of this remarkable man, who not only was able to overcome the adverse conditions of his early life, but who to the end of his days waged a relentless warfare against every force that set itself in antagonism to his conception of truth and righteousness.

When about fifteen years of age John Tillet heard, for the first time, a Methodist preacher—an incident that proved to be the transcendent event

of all his youthful years. The coveted privilege of delivering this first Methodist message to an obscure but ambitious country lad came to Rev. George Bain, the father of Rev. W. F. Bain, for many years an honored member of the Virginia Conference, and the grandfather of Rev. E. L. Bain, who was for twenty-seven years a member of the Western North Carolina Conference, but in 1919 transferred to the Virginia Conference. Rev. George Bain was for two years (1826-27) presiding elder of the Roanoke District, which included several counties in North Carolina, in proximity to the Roanoke River, and was, at that time, in the Virginia Conference.

What the preacher that day said about education took hold of the eager boy with a relentless grip as he sat in the back part of the little congregation listening eagerly to every word uttered upon this occasion, which was to him of unusual interest. The message aroused the latent ambition of the youth and fanned to a flame the desire to get an education.

A year or two later he heard Rev. Hezekiah G. Leigh, who was the leader of the Conference in behalf of Christian education and was the official agent of the Conference from 1829 to 1832 in raising money for the establishment of a new college which the Methodists were proposing to build.

These messages had led the boy to decide very



definitely to get an education, but the painfully limited educational opportunities at that time in North Carolina made the obtaining of an education an undertaking difficult in the extreme for one situated as was this Camden lad; for the only schools in the State, with the single exception of the State University at Chapel Hill, founded in 1795, were a few Church and private schools, the latter being maintained almost wholly by gospel ministers with whom education amounted to a passion.

Well-nigh all the schools and colleges in the State have come into existence since this North Carolina boy began his struggle single-handed for an education—for example, Wake Forest College did not open its doors to students till 1834; Davidson College and Guilford College in 1837; Normal College, that a few years later became Trinity College, in 1838; and Greensboro Female College not till 1846.

If North Carolina be judged by the educational facilities then furnished, the first third of the nineteenth century was truly the "Dark Age" of the State's educational history. And a full share of that darkness rested upon Camden County. As late as 1851 Wheeler writes in his "History of North Carolina": "It is a matter for regret that the cause of education is so neglected in Camden."

Amid such conditions as these in his home county and at the darkest hour of his State's history young

Tillett approached his guardian with an earnest but polite request for some money with which to pay his expenses at school, as he was anxious to get an education; but the custodian of his dead father's meager estate bluntly informed the boy that he could have no money to spend for an education.

But John Tillett, be it said to his everlasting credit, as much in love with education and learning as his honest but unsympathetic guardian was prejudiced against them, borrowed money, went to school, and prepared himself for college. His preparation for college was made at a school conducted at Elizabeth City by Rev. Mr. Buxton, an Episcopal clergyman, whose son, the late Judge Buxton of Fayetteville, became one of the eminent jurists of the State. All through his subsequent life Mr. Tillett spoke with deep appreciation and gratitude of the debt he owed to this honored clergyman, who supplemented his meager salary as rector of the local Church by teaching a private school.

Debtor first to the Baptists of old Shiloh Church, and next to the Episcopalian for preparing him for college, not yet a professing Christian, let us see what the Methodists can and will do for him.

Before taking up his associations with the Methodists, however, we refer to an incident which occurred during those early years before he left the Shiloh neighborhood, which he sometimes narrated

to his children and which is worth recording, not only as an evidence of his triumph over early environment, but also in view of its bearing on his later life-long condemnation of the liquor traffic in all its forms. It was his first introduction to the nature and effects of alcoholic drinks. Some older boys of the neighborhood, journeying with him to a country store, told him of the exhilarating effects of whisky and how much he missed by not drinking it. With some persuasion they induced him to join them in buying a bottle of whisky, which they then went into the woods to drink. When his turn came, last in the group, to put the bottle to his lips, he did not at all like the smell or the taste of it and drew back with only a sip. They urged him to go on "like a man" and drink it. "Not so much because of their bantering," he said, "but because I had invested a part of my meager and hard-earned money in the thing, did I decide that I must, if possible, get the worth of my money out of the investment; and so I made a second attempt to drink my portion of the contents of the bottle." But he was compelled to give it up without getting the worth of his money—not, however, until he had taken enough to disgust him so utterly with the horrid and nauseating effects of what he did drink that he made up his mind, not only that he would invest no more of his hard-earned money in it, but that he

would touch not, taste not, handle not in the future a thing so vile and mean. Nor did he care to go with that crowd any more. This seems to have been the beginning of his lifelong fight against whisky, of which we shall hear much as this narrative proceeds.



## II

AT RANDOLPH-MACON COLLEGE





## II

### AT RANDOLPH-MACON COLLEGE

JOHN TILLET'S life and work are among the first and best fruits of American Methodism's first chartered college; nor did Christian education ever have a stronger advocate than he was. We feel justified, therefore, in devoting more consideration than might otherwise be called for to this period and phase of his life and to the college that contributed so largely to making him what he was as an itinerant preacher.

Of all the institutions of learning now owned and controlled by the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, the oldest is Randolph-Macon College, which was first located at Boydton, in Mecklenburg County, Virginia, but was moved in 1866 to Ashland, in Hanover County, sixteen miles north of Richmond. As early as 1785 the Methodists, under the leadership of Bishops Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury, had taken out a charter for a school located at Abingdon, near Baltimore, Maryland, to which the trustees gave the name of Cokesbury College, blending the names of Coke and Asbury, the two first bishops of American Methodism. It began its work in 1787, but was burned in 1795. After an

attempt to rebuild it in the city of Baltimore, which was followed only a year later by the complete destruction of the property by fire, Bishop Asbury concluded that the Lord did not want the Methodists to have a college and so discontinued his efforts to build schools.

Other attempts, however, were made here and there throughout the country by the Methodists to provide themselves with schools and colleges, with varying degrees of success, until 1830, when the first successful efforts to secure colleges of high grade were made by them—one in Virginia and the other in New England, resulting in the establishment of Randolph-Macon College in Virginia and Wesleyan University at Middletown, Connecticut. The former was first chartered, but the latter was the first to begin the work of instruction, due to the fact that the latter took over from another institution buildings that were already in existence, whereas Randolph-Macon started with nothing but the bare ground.

It is perhaps not amiss to state just here a few facts that will explain how and why this college came to be related to the Methodists of both Virginia and North Carolina. Up to 1836 the Virginia Conference included in its boundaries many of the central counties and all of the northeastern counties of North Carolina. The South Carolina Conference

held the southern and southeastern counties (including Wilmington and the region round about) until 1850 and also embraced all the central southern counties of the State (including Charlotte, Concord, Lincolnton, Monroe, Wadesboro, etc.) until 1870, while all the territory of the Blue Ridge Mountain region belonged to the Holston Conference until 1890. The State was thus parceled out to Conferences which took their names from other States, until North Carolina came to be referred to by neighbors north and south of it in humorous taunting pleasantry, and with an air of superior State pride, as "a strip of land between two States"—while some North Carolina wit, in response to such a designation, said that "it was a valley of humility between two mountains of conceit."

This reproach was in good part taken away, however, when in 1836 the General Conference ordered a division of the Virginia Conference and the organization of the North Carolina Conference, to which approximately one-half of the preachers in the Virginia Conference as then constituted were, by General Conference action, transferred. This division took place at the next subsequent meeting of the Virginia Conference, which was held at Petersburg, Virginia, February 8 to 14, 1837, at which time and place the North Carolina Conference began its separate existence and work as a Conference. The

extreme northeastern section of North Carolina, however (which included Camden and adjoining counties, in which section was John Tillett's boyhood home), was retained within the bounds of the Virginia Conference and did not become a part of the North Carolina Conference until the autumn of 1890, at which time the Western North Carolina Conference was organized and that section of the State, which up to that time had continued under the jurisdiction of the Virginia Conference, became a part of the North Carolina Conference. In compensation for the North Carolina territory just referred to being retained by the Virginia Conference following the division of 1837, the North Carolina Conference was awarded certain Virginia territory embraced in the Danville District, on which district, as will later appear, John Tillett had, in 1854 to 1856, his first and only experience in the office of presiding elder. So much of Conference history it seemed desirable to give because of its bearing on what follows.

As early as 1826 the preachers of the Virginia Conference began to feel the need of an institution of learning of collegiate grade, not only for their young ministers, but also to meet the needs of Methodist parents who desired to send their sons to a distinctly Christian institution under the control of their own Church. This growing desire and sense

of need soon found expression in the decision to establish a college of high grade.

Inasmuch as the Virginia Conference, at that time, had almost as much territory in North Carolina and almost as many members in that State as in Virginia, it was naturally desired and decided that the proposed college should be located at some convenient point near the dividing line between the two States; and this was the determining factor in the selection of the particular spot where the college was first located, the small town of Boydton in Mecklenburg County, Virginia.

The fact that Virginia and North Carolina were uniting in establishing the college also helps in part to explain the curious fact that the Methodists should have given to their first Church college the names of two eminent public men and political leaders, neither of whom was a member of the Methodist Church—John Randolph, of Roanoke, one of the most eminent statesmen of that day, and Nathaniel Macon, a public-spirited citizen and influential leader of North Carolina, scarcely less eminent than was Randolph. These two statesmen held each other in high esteem; and Randolph once said of Macon, "He is the wisest and best man I ever knew."

If the fact that John Randolph was an old bachelor and reputed to be quite wealthy created expectations which the Methodists thought would materialize in



gifts to a new college which should bear the joint name of himself and his intimate associate and friend in a neighboring State, they were doomed to disappointment. If it turned out, however, that the name given the new college did not prove of any special advantage to it as a Methodist institution, it is also true that the name given it did not prevent the college from taking high rank, from the very start, among Southern institutions of learning and from doing a work for which the Church has been profoundly grateful. From it as a fountain have flowed streams of Christian culture and learning that have enriched and blessed, not only the Methodist Church, but other Churches also in the entire South, to an extent it would be impossible to measure.

It was on February 3, 1830, that the General Assembly of the State of Virginia granted a charter to the trustees of Randolph-Macon College to establish an institution of learning in or near Boydton, the county seat of Mecklenburg County, Virginia. At a meeting of the Board of Trustees, April 9, 1830, a committee was appointed to select a suitable location for the newly chartered institution of learning, and another committee was appointed to secure plans for necessary buildings, let the contract, and superintend the erection thereof.

With a subscription list amounting to \$20,000,

of which amount \$10,000 had been subscribed by the citizens of Mecklenburg County, the Board of Trustees, with other friends of the enterprise, upon a meager four-acre campus one mile west of the town began to build the college which for years had been the fond dream of many Church leaders in Virginia and adjoining States.

By October 9, 1832, a faculty of five members had been secured, and the buildings were sufficiently advanced for the college to open its first session.

In the meantime invitations had been sent by the Virginia Conference to the Baltimore, the Holston, the Georgia, and the South Carolina Conferences to join with the Methodists of Virginia and North Carolina in this hopeful educational venture. The South Carolina Conference promptly and heartily accepted the invitation of Virginia, as did the Georgia Conference. Consequently, the first student body to enter the new but as yet incomplete college in the fall of 1832 had upon its rolls the names of boys from Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia.

John Tillett's name appears among the students who entered the Freshman Class at the opening of the fall of 1833.

"The second session of the college," said a chronicler, "opened September 4, 1833, under favorable circumstances. A laboratory and library had been



purchased, and the latter had been increased by donations. Bishop J. O. Andrew had donated forty-three volumes; Judge A. B. Longstreet, thirty." Not an extensive library, to be sure! But quality, not quantity, was what was accounted most essential to a library in those days.

A few days after the session opened the Franklin Literary Society was organized, and among the charter members of this society appears the name of John Tillett, of North Carolina. The Washington Literary Society had been organized the year before.

The facts as recounted in the preceding paragraphs of this chapter show clearly that young Tillett entered an institution devoid of history and traditions, its building incomplete and its laboratories and library of restricted limitations. The best equipment, however, of this college, as it should be of all colleges, was its teaching force. Randolph-Macon, though subjected to the inevitable limitations of poverty and the hardships of the pioneer, had some great teachers. Who are the men that helped to make John Tillett what he was and enabled the college to send into the Methodist ministry such a preacher of righteousness as he proved to be?

Foremost among these was Stephen A. Olin, first president of the college. He was professor of English Literature in the University of Georgia at the time of his election to the presidency of Randolph-Macon.

He did not reach Boydton until January, 1833, some months after the opening of the first session. Dr. Olin remained with the college till the spring of 1837, when, on account of ill health, he was forced to surrender his work.

Of Dr. Olin's work at Randolph-Macon his biographer says: "His presidency was a brief but brilliant period in the fortunes of the college. He had manifested the highest adaptation to the responsible office which he held there. His unrivaled judgment, his shining talent, his far-seeing sagacity, his prudence in administration and firmness in government, and his masterly grasp wielded an influence for the highest good of the young men who came from far and near attracted by the prestige of his name. His genuine love of learning and enthusiasm in communicating knowledge formed a combination of qualities rarely met with in men of even the highest reputation."

James W. Hardy, who was valedictorian of young Tillett's class, gave in after years for publication some of his recollections of Dr. Olin. Among other things Mr. Hardy writes:

Dr. Olin left the college of Randolph-Macon in the spring of 1837, a few months before the class of which I was a member took their first degree. We waited on him in a body and asked him to put his signature to our diplomas, for we cherished for him a filial affection and felt that his name was indispensable. Many youthful hearts were sad the day he left

## 36    *The Iron Duke of the Methodist Itinerancy*

college for his European tour. The students met in chapel, adopted appropriate resolutions, and appointed two of their number to accompany him to the railroad, a distance of sixty miles. He was worn down by disease, and we had no expectation of seeing his face again. He rode in his carriage on a bed and preferred to go with no one accompanying him save his faithful and devoted wife. We bade him good-by as children shake the hands of their dying father, and we saw him no more.

This man, now forty years of age, who had so forcibly impressed the young men under his care, drove to Petersburg, Virginia, and there boarded the train for his trip abroad in the quest for health. By travel in Europe, Palestine, Egypt, and other countries of the East, he regained his health, returned to accept the presidency of Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, and eventually took his place, in the estimation of competent critics, as one of the most able and brilliant preachers of world-wide Methodism.

Who can estimate the influence of that man upon the lives of those students, susceptible as young men of ambitions and high ideals invariably are to the magnetic touch of a great life? The educational value of such a life in the training of youth is beyond computation. Randolph-Macon and Stephen Olin at that time must have been, in educational and inspirational value, about equal to Mark Hopkins and his famous log!

Other teachers associated with Stephen Olin are worthy of being named in this connection. Martin P. Parks, educated at West Point and professor of mathematics, was a brilliant preacher secured from North Carolina. Landon C. Garland, who succeeded Dr. Olin as president, served seven years in that capacity, then became president first of the University of Alabama, and later of the University of Mississippi, and finally chancellor of Vanderbilt University, was at this time a young teacher in the new college. Edward Drumgoole Sims, a man of striking personal appearance like Dr. Olin, was a most devout Christian, a fine scholar, and a model teacher.

Such was the type of men to whom in those first years at Randolph-Macon had been intrusted the training of the youths gathered for instruction, and the discriminating reader will agree that it was a good place for young men to prepare for their life work.

Among the incidents of John Tillett's college days which he in later years narrated to his children is one that may be referred to here, for it illustrates not only his habits, but to some extent his character and his conscientious desire to make his time and service count for something really worth while. Instead of spending his time allotted to recreation, as the other students at college generally did, in play and games of sport, he took upon himself the task

of clearing the college campus of the many stumps that were left when the trees were cut down to make way for the new college and its occupants. The grounds that had been selected for the campus were at first thick with the original forest trees; and although many were left for shade, it was necessary to cut down many, and the stumps of these were all there to greet the students who, along with John Tillett, entered the college in the early fall of 1833. Our student from Camden County, North Carolina, thought they were an eyesore, and it did not take long for him to make up his mind as to how he was going to employ his recreation time. It was a difficult job, but they had to come up! He bantered his classmates to join him in this service *pro bono collegio*, but they laughed at him and went to their games. With pickax and grubbing hoe he pegged away at his job, day after day and year after year (for it was more than he could accomplish single-handed in one year's time), until at length he had them all out of the way and the campus greatly improved in looks. It does not appear that he counted the games of sport in which his fellow students indulged as "worldly and sinful amusements" and such as he himself could not conscientiously indulge in. He simply felt that for needful diversion and recreation some form of useful service could, in his case, be found which would furnish exercise just as

healthful to mind and body as the games of sport which the average student felt were necessary to his health and happiness.

An index to the serious views of life and the high ideals that in those days characterized the students of Randolph-Macon may be found in the subjects chosen for the graduating orations of the class of 1837. Note this partial list of subjects and the names of the speakers:

No. 1. Salutatory Address—Latin Oration: *On Education*. By F. N. Mullen, of Pasquotank, North Carolina.

No. 5. Select English Oration: *The Dangers Resulting from the Influence of Great Talents Destitute of Moral Principle*. By Warren Dupre, of South Carolina.

No. 8. *Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Conscience*. By J. L. Clemmons, Davidson County, North Carolina.

No. 13. *Popular Amusements*. By John Tillett, of North Carolina.

No. 15. *The Influence of Christianity upon Civilization*. By W. F. Sanford, of Alabama.

No. 16. *Correct and Settled Principles the Only Guarantee of a Young Man's Ultimate Success*. By J. W. Hardy, of Georgia.

Sixteen subjects, ranging from "Foreign Immigration" through the "Origin of Conscience," "Popular Amusements," "The Fine Arts," "Christianity and Civilization," to "Female Education," provided a long, varied, and substantial bill of fare for a commencement audience.

Whether there were giants or not in those days



among the orators we have little means of knowing, but among the hearers there must have been giants in power of intellectual endurance to be able to live through sixteen of these orations that taxed the auditors with so great a variety of ponderous subjects.

But that was an age unspoiled by moving pictures, light opera, and lecturers whose chief function is to create a laugh. Auditors accustomed to sermons two and three hours in length could, with becoming patience, listen to sixteen college graduates, with their superior wisdom, discuss the great questions of the day and of the ages.

"Popular Amusements" was the subject discussed by John Tillett on his graduation day, and to the end of his ministry this continued to be one of the great themes of his preaching. In his attitude toward this subject he was at all times and upon every occasion a Puritan of the Puritans.

The degree of Bachelor of Arts was conferred upon him, with other members of the class, on June 21, 1837, and the degree of Master of Arts in 1840. The M.A. degree came to him in accordance with the following college regulation: "No A.M. degree course is prescribed, but all A.B. men can claim the A.M. degree who can show that they have continued their studies or pursued professional studies for three years."



The youth who came out of a remote Baptist country community in Camden County to a Methodist college had been influenced by two Methodist preachers to take this step. One of these men was Rev. George Bain, the first Methodist that the lad had been privileged to hear preach, to whom reference has already been made; and the other was William Elliott, a useful local preacher of his old home community. At college he came under the direct and evangelistic gospel messages of another Methodist preacher, Rev. W. B. Rowzie.

In the year 1834 this eminently useful and saintly man, who was in later years financial agent and for some time chaplain of the college, but at that time pastor of the Greenville Circuit, Petersburg District, held a revival meeting at the college, and during that series of services John Tillett among others was converted and joined the Church.

His plans up to this time had been to complete his education at college and then study law. But with his conversion and his joining the Church there came a change of plans for his life's work. He felt called of God to preach and, in consequence of that call, turned from the law to the Christian ministry.

This turning from the law to the ministry after his conversion could not be attributed to any notion of his that the law is not a fit profession for a religious man. For two of his sons, with his full approval,

became lawyers, and because of their sterling characters and their standing in that honorable profession became the peculiar pride and joy of his old age.

Considerations of an entirely different sort led to his change of plans. First among these deciding factors was his certain and direct call of God to the work of a gospel minister. God had called him, and he dared not refuse the call. And to one looking across the years it appears to have been a call to a specific task. God, at that time, needed in North Carolina at least one Elijah who could for fifty years wage an unceasing warfare upon liquor-making, liquor-drinking, gambling, and all other social evils alarmingly prevalent in those days. Few men, either by nature or by training or by grace, are qualified for such an herculean task. But God found such a man in the Camden County lad who was borrowing money to pay for the privilege of sitting at the feet of Stephen Olin and his colaborers, and he laid his hand upon him and made him a minister of righteousness, to serve a generation of men and women that greatly needed the message he brought them.

Men of smaller caliber and with less tonnage of iron in their blood could with success practice law, but they could not do the work that God had mapped out for this elect reformer and prophet of God. So the Lord took John Tillett from his intended law

office, in the shadow of some county courthouse, and made of him an itinerant Methodist preacher, who was destined to become as valiant a knight of the saddlebags as ever drew lance on a field of battle.

This Randolph-Macon student already had from heaven his accredited credentials to preach the gospel and to battle with the forces of unrighteousness, but in his junior year at college the Church placed in his hands the parchments from the properly constituted ecclesiastical authority. This license to preach is dated 1836 and is signed by Lewis Skidmore, presiding elder of the Petersburg District. Fifty-four years later in the city of Charlotte he, in death, surrendered his commission without a stain upon his escutcheon.

All honor to Randolph-Macon College for what it did for John Tillett; for without its aid the Camden County lad from the lowlands of North Carolina could never have been transformed into "The Iron Duke of the Methodist Itinerancy." We do not wonder that his appreciation of what his *Alma Mater* did for him led him later to give two of his own sons the benefits of collegiate training at this institution of learning.



**III**  
**ENTERS THE ITINERANCY**





### III

#### ENTERS THE ITINERANCY

JOHN TILLET, just out of college, was in debt for his education; for it had taken all that he had inherited from his father and more to meet his expenses while pursuing his studies. As hundreds of other young men had done under similar circumstances, he turned to the schoolroom for employment. He first taught school in Clemmons ville, Forsythe County, North Carolina. After ten months of successful work in Clemmons ville and six months in the neighboring town of Mocksville, the young schoolmaster entered upon his long and remarkable career as an itinerant Methodist preacher.

Sixteen months in the schoolroom had enabled him, by close economy, to get rid of the debts incurred at college; and now, free from debt, he was at liberty to assume the life of perpetual poverty imposed upon a Methodist circuit rider. No vow of poverty on the part of the individual was required; for the Church, under the leadership of Bishop Asbury, had fixed that matter by making the stipend of an unmarried preacher the impressive sum of one hundred dollars a year; and to the married man was given the same unquestioned assurance

of an enforced poverty—one hundred dollars additional being added for the wife, and fifty dollars for each child.

Peter Stuart Ney,\* who taught a private school in the neighborhood, in conversation with his young associate in the teaching profession remarked one day: “Do you mean to say that you are going to quit a six-hundred-dollar job, with prospects of an increase in salary, to become a Methodist preacher at a salary of one hundred and fifty dollars? You are either crazy or an unmitigated fool!” Frenchman that he was, he did not understand a thing like this.

But John Tillett did not permit the dollar to count a feather’s weight in turning him from the task to which he believed that God had called him.

---

\*A curious story was long in circulation concerning this rather mysterious and unique country school-teacher. Peter Stuart Ney was a Frenchman of distinguished bearing and impressive military mien who, as above stated, taught school in the same community where John Tillett was teaching, and for some months they were fellow boarders in the same house. He resembled, to a remarkable degree, it is said, the pictures of the famous Marshal Ney of France, who, it will be remembered, after a most remarkable and brilliant military career in the French army, fell into disrepute with the French government and was tried by court-martial and condemned to be shot, which sentence was executed on December 7, 1815. A curious story got started in the neighborhood where Mr. Ney taught to the effect that he was the real Marshal Ney, who was supposed to have been shot, but who

Life to him was not measured by money or any other material standard. Consequently he continued and consummated his plans to join the Conference at its approaching session and thus "played the fool" in the judgment of this school-teacher from France who, whether he was the real Marshal Ney or not, evidently did not have in his veins that Huguenot blood which, even to the third and fourth generation, has power to make moral heroes and "Iron Dukes."

At a Quarterly Conference held at Mount Sinai Church, on the Mocksville Circuit, the young school-teacher on October 27, 1838, obtained a recommendation to the Annual Conference for admission on trial into the traveling connection.

---

was really, according to this story, not executed, but simply feigned death; and by connivance with those who were supposed to have shot him, he escaped, came to America, and settled in this retired section of North Carolina, where he was under promise to live out his days *incognito* and not betray those who, though ordered to shoot him, had really spared his life. This French schoolmaster was very reticent about the matter when sober; but whenever he imbibed too freely of alcohol, which he did ever and anon, he would mount his horse and, riding military style, would pose as Marshal Ney. It caused no little comment. Rev. James A. Weston, an Episcopal clergyman, it will be recalled, wrote a book to prove that this man was the real Marshal Ney, in which volume this modern myth finds curious, impressive, and interesting interpretation as veritable history.

“Mount Sinai Church!” What an honor to it now, that it recommended this young school-teacher to the Conference for admission to the ranks of the itinerant Methodist ministry! From “Mount Sinai” went forth one Moses; and now from this “Mount Sinai” goes forth another leader. Three months later he was on hand at Salisbury, where the North Carolina Conference met, January 30, 1839, and was received on trial as an itinerant Methodist preacher. With this as a beginning he attended without a break forty-six consecutive sessions of the North Carolina Conference.

The Conference at Salisbury was the second session of the North Carolina Conference, as separate and distinct from the Virginia Conference, to which its preachers and territory had belonged up to the session of 1837, when the last joint session was held at Petersburg, Virginia.

The statistics for that year show six districts—the Raleigh, New Bern, Washington, Danville, Salisbury, Greensboro—and forty-seven pastoral charges, with a total membership of fifteen thousand, seven hundred and nineteen. The net gain in membership for the preceding year is given at four hundred and seven. Among the leaders of the Conference at that time were Moses Brock, James Reid, and Peter Doub.

“Iredell Circuit, John Tillett.”

So the presiding bishop announced in reading the appointments at the close of the Salisbury Conference in 1839.

The Iredell Circuit, with seven hundred and twenty white members and a hundred and four colored members, was the second largest circuit in the Conference. The Stokes Circuit, with eight hundred and sixty-four white and forty-eight colored members, stood at the head numerically. These figures show that upon the inexperienced young preacher had been placed a tremendous responsibility; for the most important and difficult work given to pastors in those days was not the stations, which were all small, but the large circuits. This circuit covered an extensive stretch of territory, the day of compact circuits having not yet arrived.

The Iredell Circuit, big both from the viewpoint of area and of numbers, embraced a section of country where Dr. James Hall had proved himself a master workman for his Lord, as he ministered to the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, who had been influential among the first settlers of Iredell County. In addition to eminent Presbyterians who had wrought well in that section of the State, the Methodist circuit riders, for sixty years, had gone preaching, building churches, and establishing camp meetings where the great preachers of Methodism were accustomed to assemble.

The young preacher who had been sent to the Iredell Circuit from the Salisbury Conference could hardly be expected to turn the world upside down in that particular section, even though he was—what was rare in the Conference in those days—a college graduate. But he did deport himself in such a manner that seven years later there was a demand for him to return, and he was returned to this charge for a term of two years; and then, after an absence of sixteen years, he was sent yet again to the Iredell Circuit, where he remained two years. A most remarkable record was this, for a man who never sought popular favor.

Forty years ago the old Methodist people of Iredell County, as was their custom, would sit around the fireside through the long winter evenings in their country homes and talk about the circuit riders of other days. Fresh in the memories of those people were the names of ministers not a few who labored among them, but the mention of one name among all the rest, as if by some magic touch, always struck fire. That was the name of John Tillet. His ministry was oftenest recalled because he, beyond all others, had given Methodist people to understand that they must be Christians not by spells and in spots, but all the time, all over and everywhere; and this meant as he interpreted Christianity and Methodism that they must obey the rules of the



Church, that they must pay their debts, must not play cards, or gamble, or dance, or go to circuses, and—more important if anything than these—that they should neither make, nor sell, nor drink alcoholic and intoxicating liquors.

While his preaching was not lacking in the exposition of Scripture and in the proclamation of the great cardinal doctrines of Christianity, it was his outspoken condemnation of the things just referred to that caused his sermons to be talked about in the community and remembered long after he had moved to another pastoral charge.

From the Conference which met in New Bern on January 29, 1840, the young circuit rider, having completed his first year on trial, was sent to the Tarboro Circuit, where he served until December of the same year, when, for the first time, the Conference assembled in annual session before the Christmas holidays, and not, as hitherto, in January or February; and this earlier date for the North Carolina Conference has continued from that time to the present. The Conference met in Mocksville on December 23, 1840, and John Tillett thus, by a happy coincidence, had the pleasure of revisiting the locality where he had taught school and where the Mocksville Circuit Quarterly Conference at "Mount Sinai Church" had recommended him for admission on trial. At this session of the Conference



he was received into full connection and was ordained a deacon by Bishop Thomas A. Morris.

In the minutes of that session of the Conference there is an entry stating that "J. T. Brame, Gaston E. Brown, John Tillett, and William H. Barnes were severally examined before the Conference, received into full connection, and elected to the office of deacons."

From this Conference John Tillett was sent to the Beaufort Circuit. After seven years from the date of his departure for college, he had gotten back to the fish and oyster country and was now stationed not a great distance from where he was reared.

In 1840 there were sixty members of the North Carolina Conference, of whom forty-six were married. Twelve of the married men had homes and farms where their families lived and provided for themselves no little of their living expenses. The entire Conference, at that time, had only two parsonages; and according to James W. Reid, one of the Conference leaders, the unmarried men were more popular than the married men, because not so burdensome to their respective charges.

This was not an inviting prospect for men with growing families, or for unmarried men with matrimonial inclinations. And such inclinations have been quite common with Methodist preachers from the beginning, in spite of good Bishop Asbury's

example and emphatic injunctions to the contrary. Asbury might lift up his voice in lamentation and cry, "The devil and the women are about to get all my preachers!" But those same preachers went right ahead with their practical protest against the Roman Catholic doctrine of the celibacy of the clergy.\*

Cupid is not a diligent student of finance; neither does the little unclad and winged god give much heed to the wherewithal with which one shall be clothed and fed. Consequently, let us not even feign surprise when told that the pastor of the Beaufort Circuit had on October 6, 1841, just three weeks before the Annual Conference assembled in Raleigh.

---

\*In the first period of American Methodist history unmarried men, untrammelled by family ties, were much more available for and useful in itinerant ministerial service than were married men. The Bishop, therefore, did not welcome at the session of a conference the announcement that such and such a young minister had been married or was soon to be married. It occurred, at one session of a certain Conference, presided over by Bishop Asbury, that announcement was made concerning several of the ministers in turn that, because of marriage, they would have to locate; and the yet more serious announcement was also made of man after man that he had fallen into sin and been expelled from the ministry. At length the Bishop, being unable to receive longer in silence these announcements, exclaimed: "Brethren, it looks like the devil and the women are going to get all my preachers!"

yielded to Cupid's call and himself made the great adventure.

His bride was Miss Elizabeth Jenkins Wyche, the daughter of James Wyche,\* the first president of the old Raleigh and Gaston Railroad, which was one of the first railroads constructed in the State of North Carolina. It is now a part of the extended Seaboard Air Line System. She was one of twelve children, ten sons and two daughters, all of whom grew to maturity. One of these sons was Rev. Ira T. Wyche, a well-known and most useful member of the North Carolina Conference, who joined the Conference only one year in advance of his future broth-

---

\*There is good reason for believing that Mr. Wyche was not at all enthusiastic over his daughter's marrying an itinerant Methodist preacher. He doubtless knew far more of the hardships of an itinerant preacher's life than did his daughter. Mrs. Eliza Wyche Tillett entertained her husband and children, in later years, with an account of how two young Methodist preachers were visiting her and pressing their suit at one and the same time and how she went to her father for advice and received, in return, nothing more than the laconic reply, "Either or neither!" This left her just where she was before, and she had to decide the question for herself. She decided in favor of the Randolph-Macon graduate; but within a year or two thereafter she saw the rejected suitor most happily married to a deeply consecrated young woman, who became a very "mother in Israel," her only son becoming a minister and an honored member of the North Carolina Conference.

er-in-law. The Wyche family home was on Tar River in Granville County, though official duties necessitated Mr. Wyche's spending much of his time in the city of Raleigh, where he died in May, 1845. North Carolina owed much to this modest but public-spirited citizen. It is our information that his numerous descendants have with but few exceptions been Methodists.

For a girl accustomed to every comfort of a good home, to join her fortunes with a young Methodist preacher, in a Conference with only two parsonages, neither of which he could hope, for a single moment, to have for his own home, and with a salary so meager that the miserable allowance should be called a piteous makeshift rather than a salary, was, to put it as mildly as words will allow, taking a considerable risk. But the matrimonial ventures of young women have been, in every age of the world's history, one of the unfathomable mysteries of the sex.

John Tillett, however, proved a good risk, and Elizabeth Wyche was in every way worthy of her husband. For twenty-one years they walked together with the glow of youthful love in their hearts and the warmth of an undying affection aflame about the rugged and thorny pathway of their journey. No efforts at ostentation marked their married life, but through all the years the companionship of the one was unspeakably precious to the other. When-

ever there came a forced separation, however brief, the letters passed with beautiful frequency. He was one Methodist preacher who did not care to be a presiding elder (he served as presiding elder but two years, asking then to be relieved), because the duties of the office would compel him to remain away from home so much of the time. Greater love than this (renouncing the presiding eldership) hath no itinerant preacher for wife and children, Methodist preachers themselves being judges!

He cherished no ambition or aspiration for ecclesiastical preferment. It might possibly have been better for the Church if he had not shrunk so from positions of leadership and official responsibility.

With the completion of his probation in Conference and his marriage to the elect young woman who, from the very outset, was to prove herself an ideal Methodist preacher's wife, John Tillett had entered, fully equipped, the high and holy work of an itinerant Methodist preacher.

A list of the pastoral charges which he served, with the date of his appointment to each, is appended at the end of this chapter. The names of places and figures cannot tell the story of a human life with its joys and its sorrows, its toils and its triumphs, but even these imperfect symbols of location and measurement, in this case, become impressive, es-



pecially to one blessed with the gift of imagination to take in the scope of their suggestions.

It is an impressive spectacle to see a Conference of itinerant preachers waiting in reverent and attentive silence to receive their marching orders from a Methodist bishop at the close of an Annual Conference. Few, if any, more loyal and obedient sons of the itinerant host have ever gone forth to spread scriptural holiness over these lands than John Tillett. When Saul of Tarsus, after his conversion, inquired, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" the answer came: "Arise and go to Ananias, the divinely appointed officer of the church, and he will tell thee what thou shalt do. His answer is my answer." To this North Carolina itinerant preacher, who for well-nigh half a century went annually to the great Head of the Church, as the Annual Conference season came around, and prayed that he might be divinely appointed to his work, there ever came the same (to him) confident and satisfying answer: "Go to the bishop and his cabinet, and what they bid you do, that do!"

And by faith he went forth, not knowing what awaited him, save that God would be with him and give him a man's full work, whithersoever he was sent.



## APPOINTMENTS OF JOHN TILLET

Date of Conference	Place of meeting	Appointment
January 30, 1839 . . . .	Salisbury . . . .	Iredell Circuit
January 29, 1840 . . . .	Newbern . . . .	Tarboro Circuit
December 23, 1840 . . . .	Mocksville . . . .	Beaufort Circuit
October 27, 1841 . . . .	Raleigh . . . .	Plymouth and Tarboro
October 26, 1842 . . . .	Louisburg . . . .	Smithfield Circuit
October 25, 1843 . . . .	Halifax . . . .	Granville Circuit
December 4, 1844 . . . .	Pittsboro . . . .	Granville Circuit
December 3, 1845 . . . .	Washington . . . .	Halifax (Va.) Circuit
December 2, 1846 . . . .	Newbern . . . .	Iredell Circuit
December 1, 1847 . . . .	Greensboro . . . .	Iredell Circuit
November 22, 1848 . . . .	Danville, Va . . . .	Mocksville Circuit
November 28, 1849 . . . .	Oxford . . . .	Mocksville Circuit
November 13, 1850 . . . .	Warrenton . . . .	Davidson Circuit
November 25, 1851 . . . .	Salisbury . . . .	Davidson Circuit
November 3, 1852 . . . .	Louisburg . . . .	Smithfield Circuit
November 9, 1853 . . . .	Raleigh . . . .	Smithfield Circuit
November 15, 1854 . . . .	Pittsboro . . . .	Danville District
November 14, 1855 . . . .	Wilmington . . . .	Danville District
November 12, 1856 . . . .	Greensboro . . . .	Henderson and Clarksville
December 2, 1857 . . . .	Goldsboro . . . .	Henderson and Clarksville
December 8, 1858 . . . .	Newbern . . . .	Haw River Circuit
December 14, 1859 . . . .	Beaufort . . . .	Haw River Circuit
December 5, 1860 . . . .	Salisbury . . . .	Rockingham Circuit
December 4, 1861 . . . .	Louisburg . . . .	Rockingham Circuit
December 3, 1862 . . . .	Raleigh . . . .	Person Circuit
December 2, 1863 . . . .	Greensboro . . . .	Person Circuit
December —, 1864 . . . .	Mocksville . . . .	Iredell Circuit
December —, 1865 . . . .	Mocksville . . . .	Iredell Circuit
November 7, 1866 . . . .	Fayetteville . . . .	Granville Circuit
November 27, 1867 . . . .	Wilmington . . . .	Granville Circuit
December 2, 1868 . . . .	Statesville . . . .	Granville Circuit
November 24, 1869 . . . .	Newbern . . . .	Durham Circuit
November 23, 1870 . . . .	Greensboro . . . .	Durham Circuit
November 29, 1871 . . . .	Charlotte . . . .	Robeson Circuit
December 4, 1872 . . . .	Fayetteville . . . .	Robeson Circuit
December 10, 1873 . . . .	Goldsboro . . . .	Yanceyville Circuit
December 2, 1874 . . . .	Raleigh . . . .	Yanceyville Circuit
December 1, 1875 . . . .	Wilmington . . . .	Pittsboro Circuit
November 29, 1876 . . . .	Greensboro . . . .	Carthage Circuit
November 28, 1877 . . . .	Salisbury . . . .	Carthage Circuit
November 27, 1878 . . . .	Charlotte . . . .	Bladen Circuit
December 3, 1879 . . . .	Wilson . . . .	Bladen Circuit
December 1, 1880 . . . .	Winston . . . .	Alamance Circuit
November 23, 1881 . . . .	Durham . . . .	Alamance Circuit
December 6, 1882 . . . .	Raleigh . . . .	Alamance Circuit
November 23, 1883 . . . .	Statesville . . . .	Alamance Circuit
November 26, 1884 . . . .	Wilmington . . . .	Pleasant Garden Circuit
November 25, 1885 . . . .	Charlotte . . . .	Pleasant Garden Circuit
December 1, 1886 . . . .	Reidsville . . . .	Superannuated

And so on through 1887, 1888, and 1889 to July 17, 1890, the date of his death. When the Western North Carolina Conference was organized in 1890, its bounds being fixed by the General Conference in May of that year, the new Conference automatically took in all the preachers residing within its bounds. As John Tillett was then making his home with his son, Mr. Charles W. Tillett, in Charlotte, he became under the law a member of the new Conference, though he died before the first session was held. He was taken sick just before the convening of the North Carolina Conference at Charlotte in 1885 and did not attend that session. Although he was continued as pastor of the Pleasant Garden Circuit for 1885-86, his health was such that he was able to do but little if any preaching that year; and at the Conference which met in Reidsville in 1886 he was placed on the superannuate list. The last session of the Annual Conference which he attended was that held at Wilmington in November, 1884.

A mere glance at these various pastorates which he filled during the half century of his itinerant life will show how fitting it is to describe him as a typical Methodist "circuit rider" of the nineteenth century. In his day the possession of "saddle bags" and a "sulky" constituted a necessary part of a Methodist itinerant's equipment for service.



IV  
INNER RELIGIOUS LIFE



## IV

### INNER RELIGIOUS LIFE

HIS conversion and call to preach marked an epoch in the life of John Tillett. The earnest and serious-minded youth had, as we have previously noted, expected upon the completion of his college course to study law. These plans, however, were entirely changed after God called him to preach, and the prospective lawyer became a minister of the gospel.

But those spiritual experiences through which he passed while in college touched more deeply than a change of plan in his life work. They marked the beginning of a long and persistent search after holiness of heart, without which no man can see God.

From childhood a good conscience had been his guide, but his conversion gave an added sensitiveness to that conscience which to the end of his days ruled him with unquestioned supremacy, and sometimes with a "rod of iron," but for which he would never have become what we have designated him—the Iron Duke of the Methodist itinerancy. Iron dukes such as John Tillett have iron not only in their blood, but in their consciences also.

Had John Tillett lived in the days of the early



Pilgrim Fathers, he could have qualified for a place of honor among the compeers of Cotton Mather. But instead of being subjected to the stern discipline of Puritanism, which was adapted to the bleak shores of New England, and a form of Christian faith which John Tillett unquestionably would have relished with an unfailing satisfaction, he was born and brought up in the clime of our Southland, where, as we have already seen, he early came under the molding influences of Methodism, which, even in his time, had a sunnier face and a warmer heart than the Puritanism of New England.

The fires of experimental religion in John Tillett's heart had been kindled at Methodist altars, and these fires continued to burn to the end of his days. As a young minister, the most insistent cry of his religious nature was for God and to know the fullness of the love of God.

This hunger of his heart led the youthful itinerant in the fifth year of his ministry to become interested in the doctrine of entire sanctification, sometimes designated as the "Second Blessing" theory of sanctification; and in this doctrine, in the experience of this blessing, he expected to find those high spiritual attainments for which his soul hungered.

Consequently, in September, 1845, he began to keep a record of his inner religious life with the hope

that such a journal might become a means of assisting him in obtaining the desired blessing.

“Moved, I trust, by the Spirit of God,” he begins, “I this night commence keeping a journal of my religious travels on the way to the New Jerusalem. I pray the blessing of the almighty God upon this means which I have adopted to advance that state of holiness without which I cannot see my God in peace. I commenced seeking holiness of heart on Friday, the 28th of last August, and by the help of God I will never stop nor slacken my exertions until I obtain this inestimable blessing. I have generally felt greatly encouraged since I began. My soul has been rising in light and strength ever since I commenced. I am afraid I am not seeking the blessing with my whole heart, but I believe that God will help me thus to seek it. To-day instead of taking a nap, as I have allowed myself to do for some time, I engaged in secret prayer and was somewhat refreshed. I want that violence of soul which takes the kingdom of heaven by force.”

His son, Dr. W. F. Tillett, of Nashville, Tenn., has the original copy of this interesting journal, reaching, as it does, across fifteen years of his life and closing with the twentieth year of his ministry, which was a short time before the beginning of the Civil War, a

fact that may explain why he did not continue his Journal.\*

This journal gives many intimate glimpses of his inner life, because he writes with the utmost candor and without an effort to give color to anything that he says. Evidently he put on paper just what he thought and felt at the time. Prominent among the features of this whole story of his inner life is a dissatisfaction with his own attainments of the divine life, and because of its prominence we mention this first. A certain divine discontent with self is often a healthful sign in the realm of religious experience, being a not unusual precursor of advancement in the spiritual life.

The reader can at random pick out such expressions as the following: "I am not advancing in holiness as fast as I should wish." "I still feel that the Lord is with me, but I am afraid that my soul is not sufficiently vehement in seeking entire holiness." "I feel mortified with a sense of my inferiority to those whose circumstances for improvement have been so much more favorable than my own."

On Sunday, December 13, 1845, he writes: "Arrived home from Conference last night. I do not

---

\*His oldest son (James) was now a volunteer in training for the Confederate army, which he entered at the beginning of the war, serving in the cavalry under Gen. Robert E. Lee.

think that I have made any progress in grace since I left Mother Wyche's. Conference occasions have never been profitable seasons to my soul."\*

Then the Saturday night following he writes: "Yesterday I observed as a fast day, with a hope of recovering the ground I have lost in going to Conference. I found praying dull and heavy, and when dinner came I indulged until I felt condemned. In secret and family prayer in the evening I felt considerable encouragement. To-day I feel more confidence in prayer than I have for several days, though not so much as I did some weeks ago. I am afraid I give way to the enemy in indulging ambitions, aspirations after eminence for myself and my Conference. I am still determined, however, to go on."

Friday night, August 19, 1847, he makes this entry: "I am not yet rooted and grounded in love. The righteousness of God's holy law is not yet fully manifested in me. I am afraid that I am sometimes disposed to confer too much with flesh and blood. I can discover in my religion at times things that look much like flaws. But I trust that I can truly say that religion is with me a blessed reality. I can

---

\*Delegates returning from even a General Conference, where men have been elected and consecrated to the high office of Bishop, have been known to make a similar observation.

say that I am trying to commit my ways unto the Lord and to follow his directions in all my paths."

One week later he makes the following entry: "Wearied by a protracted meeting which closed yesterday, I have not strictly observed to-day as fast day. In a church trial which I conducted this evening, I found grace to maintain the spirit of meekness and forbearance in some degree. I trust through the goodness of God I am growing in grace and divine knowledge. The Lord Jesus and his cause are precious to my soul."

Four weeks later he observes: "I do not feel such a distinct sense of the Divine Presence as I desire. I feel sad evidence at times that there are within me the remains of pride, my old besetting sin. I delight, I am afraid, more than I should in those acts which are the subject of praise among my fellow creatures. I find in me a disposition to boast of such things as commend me to men. I feel that I cannot rest till I am pure within; till all this strife and war within in perfect peace shall end. I have not as yet lately observed a fast day to my entire satisfaction."

We have quoted enough from those "Confessions" of his, if the reader will permit us to use that term in this connection, to show that John Tillett, who at all times, both in his preaching and in the administration of discipline, set unusually high standards for the flock over which the Holy Ghost had made

him an overseer, was even more exacting with himself than with anyone else. He set for himself higher standards of living and a more rigid discipline than he did for any member of his flock. He practiced what he preached and brought himself to live in strict obedience to the laws of God and of the Church. He was no Pharisee who sought to lay upon other men's shoulders burdens that he would not touch with his fingers.

It is also noteworthy that he gave close and constant attention to his own inner life. A careful and rigid introspection was the daily habit of his life.

This can be explained in part by the fact that the Methodist Church in his day, as from the beginning of its history, placed great emphasis upon personal religious experience. Not a new doctrine, but a new life, had been the watchword of the Wesleyan Movement from the first, and continued to be in John Tillett's time and is yet among all true Methodists. The direct witness of the Holy Spirit to one's acceptance of God and holiness of heart were, in their religious lives, the grand objective for the people called Methodists. In his day the Methodists believed that personal religion, like charity, begins at home.

Such a conception of religion is not in accord with a certain popular notion of the present day which in our opinion is receiving undue emphasis. It is this:



That introspection, or self-examination, is of little value, that it leads to selfishness, if not morbidity, and that instead of giving such attention to one's self, the proper thing to do is to turn our thoughts to the moral and spiritual welfare of others.

The idea upon its face appears to be quite the thing. But emphasis at this point in the sphere of religion too frequently results in a sharp lookout for the sins of others while one's own sins are entirely overlooked, and when one is busy about the affairs of other people he allows his own soul to remain impoverished.

But John Tillett was not at any time ensnared by an erroneous and hurtful notion of that sort. On the contrary, he looked with constant care and a deep concern to his own spiritual health. And for that very reason he became a workman who had no reason to be ashamed of his record, which stretched across more than fifty eventful years.

On August 6, 1851, six years after he began seeking the "Second Blessing," John Tillett made a profession of entire sanctification. We let him tell the story in his own words:

On Wednesday night, August 6, I gave myself entirely to God and obtained the sanctification of my nature. Since that solemn act of consecration I have been kept by the power of God through faith from all sin. The instrument which my Heavenly Father employed to guide and urge me into this blessed state was a book written by Mrs. Phoebe Palmer, of



New York. I commenced reading it on Tuesday evening and I had progressed, I think, to the fifteenth number, which impressed me with the fear that I never should embrace this great salvation if I did not do it shortly. I, therefore, went off to myself after my family had retired and engaged in fervent prayer and earnest effort to come to God's conditions. I was enabled to give up all and to believe the offering accepted. I solemnly covenanted with God to follow his Spirit whithersoever it should lead me, making his will the rule of my life. And, blessed be God! I can say with truth that the Lord keepeth him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on him.

"I have the witness, Lord,  
That all I do is right,  
According to thy will and word,  
Well pleasing in thy sight."

I do not depend upon frames or emotions. I live by faith in the Son of God; and yet not I, but Christ liveth in me. I am fully persuaded that God will keep what I have committed unto him. I now believe as fully in God's power to save from all sin as in any other truth in the Bible. Indeed, I can say I know that it is so. I can now say,

"Thy ransomed servant, I  
Restore to thee thine own;  
And, from this moment, live or die  
To serve my God alone."

My business and my privilege is to keep the offering constantly upon God's altar, and I have unwavering faith to believe that he will keep me from all sin. Glory to God!

A few days later he writes:

Last night the powers of darkness came out against me, and

## 74 *The Iron Duke of the Methodist Itinerancy*

my soul trembled at their assault. I was praying for manifestations, pleading before God the words of Jesus when he said, "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you." When not getting the answer as I was permitted to expect, the adversary suggested that, though I had given up all and believed that I was accepted, it would amount to nothing if I did not get the manifestation I was praying for. My soul was in deep waters awhile. But the Lord comforted me with the words of James i. 12: "Blessed is he who is tempted: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life." This morning my soul rejoiced in the assurance that my name was written in heaven, engraved on the palms of my Saviour's hands.

Thursday night, October 9. Nine weeks have elapsed since I entered the blessed state of perfect love, and, glory to God, I have been kept unspotted from the world! I have not had the same rapturous communion with the Spirit that I had during the first week or two after I embraced the blessing of sanctification. But I have had, all the time, a steady, unwavering confidence and an uninterrupted peace. I find it delightfully easy to serve God with my whole heart. The Spirit of God is with me continually. I know, assuredly, that my Redeemer lives. And the life I live I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

Under date of August 7, 1852, his journal contains this entry:

Last night was the anniversary of my sanctification. I thought before it came that I would observe it as a sort of watch night; but having held services last night at Good Hope, in which I labored to the extent of my strength, I lay down to rest without thinking of it. But I am still strong in faith, I

trust, giving glory to God. I do not have that leaping and bounding of the soul in the ways of the Lord that I had for some time after I embraced the blessing of perfect love. But my confidence and assurance are as strong, if not stronger, than ever before. I feel daily the blessed reality of the great work. I have not, so far as I know, in a single instance, knowingly sinned against God, though in several instances I have doubted, or been tempted to doubt, the propriety of things that I have done.

His journal, for about two years after his entrance into the experience of sanctification, makes frequent reference to the subject. But after that he seldom mentions the subject.\*

In explanation of this, his son, Dr. W. F. Tillett, of Vanderbilt University, writes:

My father changed his views somewhat as to the *instantaneousness* of the experience of sanctification and preached

---

\*No one who makes a careful study of the personal journals and public discourses of John Wesley can fail to note how frequent are his allusions to and insistence upon entire sanctification and Christian perfection for a number of years in the middle period of his ministry; and then how later he seems to let the matter rest, and from that time on the subject receives relatively but little attention as compared with the preceding period of "storm and stress" in the proclamation of this doctrine. In 1770 Mr. Wesley said that of those who had previously professed to have attained entire sanctification by an instantaneous experience hardly one in thirty continued to profess it; and the same observation was made by him at other dates. See Tyerman's "Life of Wesley," volume III, page 59.

later in life more on *growth in grace* from conversion onward and less on an *instantaneous* experience as the method of attaining it. In changing his views in connection with a progressive religious experience, he never spoke as if he felt that he had lost the blessing he had previously received. He simply interpreted that experience differently from the way he interpreted it while he was under the spell of Mrs. Palmer's beautiful and wooing picture of the holy life and how to attain it. To his children—and I am persuaded to others also—my father grew more and more “sanctified” as he advanced in life.

It will be well, just here, to remember that John Tillett's long life of sacrifice and service, of un-failing devotion to God and to his Church, and of searching after those spiritual riches which by right belong to the children of our Heavenly Father could not be measured by a doctrine about the method of attaining holiness; neither could it be put within the circumscribed limits of opinions or logical syllogism.

Just as the odor of Mary's alabaster box, which was a gift of passionate love to her Lord, could not be restricted within certain obligations to the poor, but filled the room and has filled the world, so the life which is overflowing with a constant and passionate devotion to Jesus Christ cannot be confined within boundaries prescribed by intellectual processes. The intellectual conceptions may serve as guideposts, but can do little beyond that.

And John Tillett's life was an overflowing life—it overflowed with a constant and passionate devotion to his Lord. It could not, therefore, be measured by the doctrines that he believed, and to which he gave unmeasured emphasis, for these were only the banks and braes to guide that river of his life which ever flowed onward with increasing volume and that made glad the City of God.

The acceptance, therefore, of one view of sanctification in early life and of another later is only an accident in his spiritual history. This change of opinion on a question of doctrine never affected his life centers. The depth and sincerity of his religious nature remained ever the same, and at all times he eagerly and persistently sought the sunlit heights of religious experience. The doctrine of sanctification that he later believed, and lived, and preached did not put any less emphasis upon a conscious religious experience and upon a vital relationship of faith and love to Jesus Christ than did the doctrine set forth in the writings of those who believed in the instantaneousness of sanctification. But he did come to attach less importance to the mode of attaining a richer and deeper experience in the spiritual life and to the subjective moods and feelings that “come and go” and which for that reason constitute an unsafe index of one's permanent spiritual possessions. He placed less value in later

life upon one's profession of Christian perfection and more value upon a Christian believer's so living that his neighbors and those who knew him best would profess perfection for him. At no time perhaps did Mr. Wesley's friends and followers have more reason for believing in his sanctification than when, in a letter to Dr. Dodd, he wrote of himself saying: "I have told all the world I am not perfect. . . . I have not attained the character I draw."

John Tillett's ideals of personal holiness were not static, but progressive, and they always moved ahead of his experience and attainments and beckoned him onward and upward to higher heights of holiness. "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if so be that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended; but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." If to be "thus minded" means to be perfect, thus was John Tillett perfect.

V

THE PROPHET WITH A PASSION FOR  
RIGHTEOUSNESS AND A GENIUS  
FOR DISCIPLINE





## V

### THE PROPHET WITH A PASSION FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS AND A GENIUS FOR DISCIPLINE

WE have seen how it came to pass that from an obscure section of the "Albemarle Country" came this iron-blooded youth of imperial will who, in spite of the adverse conditions that prevailed in that somnolent section, became possessed of high educational and moral ideals; and, remaining ever true to these lofty ideals, he completed his college training, taught school to pay for his education, and eventually, in the providence of God, entered the North Carolina Conference, a well-equipped minister of the gospel.

And the very forces, both inherent and acquired, that were dominant in the preparatory years of his life remained in command through his entire public ministry. An imperial will, a conscientious devotion to duty, and an unfailing loyalty to his ideals, to his God, and to his Church, continued to the end of his life outstanding features of his sterling manhood. In every element of his richly endowed character he showed himself a "bondslave of Jesus Christ." He felt that "he was not his own, for he had been bought with a price." He interpreted

seriously the vows of Church membership and the call to preach; and that call was not at the beginning of his ministry simply; it was continuous—he kept hearing it as long as he lived.

The unflagging zeal with which John Tillett enforced every law within the scope of his administration led some to think of him as a legalist, with a blind devotion to the letter of the law. But such was not the case. That he, throughout the long years of his ministry, enforced the law, and this without regard to immediate or ultimate results in its bearing on himself and his personal popularity, cannot be questioned for a single moment. To him no part of the Methodist Discipline was a dead letter. He believed with all his heart that Methodist people should obey the laws of their Church—believed that laws were made to be obeyed; and as much as in him was, he saw that “the flock over which the Holy Ghost had made him an overseer” lived up to that standard, or else he called them to account because of their failure to do so.

But John Tillett interpreted and enforced discipline as a thing divinely designed to save people, not to damn them. He regarded discipline as a method of dealing with inconsistent and backslidden Church members which, if faithfully and firmly but lovingly enforced, would result in leading them to give up their sins, and thus save them to the Church

and to a Christian life, rather than cause them to withdraw from the Church and give themselves over to sin. And this was generally the result of discipline as he administered it. Although he was what may be called a disciplinarian, it turned out, when his ministry was compared with that of ministers who neglected discipline and were opposed to applying it except in the most scandalous cases, that fewer members had been actually lost to the Church under his ministry and by his methods than under the ministry and methods of those who paid little or no attention to discipline. No one could thunder more vigorously against sins than he did from the pulpit, but he believed in following this up with private and personal visitations and appeals; and if these went unheeded, he warned the offenders of the consequences, of the necessity of enforcing discipline against them if they would not give up their sinful practices. And he did enforce it time and again, with most happy results.

Many cases might be cited in his ministry to show the good results of his enforcement of discipline, some cases where the offenses were of a serious nature and others less serious; as, for example, indulgence in worldly and sinful amusements.

One instance of the latter type of offenders may he fittingly referred to. It is the case of a remarkably bright and gifted young woman who was passionately

fond of dancing and playing cards. Converted in one of Mr. Tillett's revivals, she applied for membership in the Church and was received, but not without her attention being called to her vows as including the giving up of all indulgences in her former favorite pleasures. It was not long, however, before her exuberant nature gave in at a festive social gathering, and she plunged into the dance and games of cards with her former enthusiasm. Her pastor, hearing of what had befallen his young convert, went to see her. When she saw how she had violated her solemn vows, she wept bitterly and on promising not to repeat her offense she was allowed to remain in the Church; for she was indeed anxious to be a member of the Church and not to be excluded from its folds.

But again in the course of a few months worldly-minded and pleasure-loving companions induced her to join them in "the pleasures of sin for a season," and again she went back on her vows. The pastor talked kindly but firmly to her and told her she must now be excluded from the Church. This was done. But she was very unhappy to find herself no longer in fellowship with the people of God—so unhappy that a few months of meditation on what she had done brought her to full repentance and to a decision to ask for restoration to Church membership. The pastor, to whom in it all she was devotedly attached, took her back again and so deeply im-

pressed and influenced her, by his kind but courageous and firm insistence upon fidelity to Church vows and abstinence from indulgences which stood between her and a useful and happy Christian life that she never more needed to have Church discipline administered to her. She became thereafter an active Christian worker, married an itinerant Methodist preacher, and her son is one of the most useful and prominent ministers of the Church to-day.

Other cases might be cited of backsliders, some of them weak and wavering disciples, who were developed into eminently useful Christians under his firm enforcement of discipline.

The question here and now is not as to whether dancing and card-playing and such like things are compatible or incompatible with membership in the Methodist Church or with a consistent Christian life. If that were the question, and the present all-but-universal neglect of discipline for indulgence in amusements of this kind should be interpreted as the correct attitude of the Church and ministry toward these and other like things—and if it should be said that the present leniency of the Church toward such things should always have been the policy and practice of the Church and ministry—then indeed it would follow that John Tillett should be discredited as a prophet overrighteous and overzealous in matters that would have been better ignored by him



and passed over in silence. But this "Iron Duke of the Itinerancy" believed that the "General Rules" of the Church were things to be lived up to, and that the repeated deliverances of the bishops and of Annual and General Conferences against worldly and sinful amusements, in which these specific things were mentioned by name, meant what they said when they declared them to be inconsistent with membership in the Methodist Church; and he felt that fidelity to his ministerial vows called for the application and enforcement of these official utterances of the Church. To say one thing and do another, to say a thing and then so to act as to justify the inference that after all it was an utterance not meant to be interpreted literally and executed in good faith—an inconsistency of this kind was so utterly incompatible with John Tillett's way of thinking and speaking and acting that he could but think that the Church's utterances against worldly and sinful amusements meant exactly what they said and that pastors should govern themselves accordingly.

He would doubtless have welcomed a separation of healthful, innocent, and legitimate amusements and entertainments from those that are hurtful and undermining to Christian character. But taking things as they were in his day, and judging the tree by its fruits, he regarded the dance hall and the card



table, with their inevitable accompaniments, as enemies to Christian life and character that should be met and fought outright. Since his day the drift has seemed to be away from his attitude toward these popular amusements and from his method of dealing with them. But is there not an increasing number of ministers and Christian laymen, at the present day, who are feeling that now, even more perhaps than in John Tillett's day, the lascivious dance and the godless gaming table are among the worst enemies of the Church and among the most subtle and pernicious influences at work to draw young men and young women away from the Christian life?

It is but proper and right to add that it was less difficult to enforce Church discipline seventy-five or even fifty years ago than it is now, and efforts to enforce it were more successful and effective in the earlier years of John Tillett's ministry (1839 to 1861) than was the case after the Civil War and during the last years of his life. But to the very last he both believed in and, as far as was possible, practiced the application of discipline as one of the most effective methods of saving people from their sins.

The conscientious enforcement of discipline was thus with him no Pharisaical round of legal observance, merely to fulfil the letter of the law. On the contrary, he was an idealist of the most pro-

nounced type—not an idealist in the sense of being a dreamer up in the air, out of touch with the practical affairs about him, for he was peculiarly interested in people and in all the minute details of everyday life. He kept up with what was going on in the communities where he lived. The most cursory perusal of his correspondence convinces one of this fact.

But he never, in a single instance, allowed himself to fall under the dominion of his immediate environment. If existing conditions failed to measure up to his standard of right, this man, with his ever-present ideal of what the world ought to be, spared no effort to better those conditions and make them to conform to those standards that he had set for himself and for the Church and the community for whose moral ideals and practices he felt, as a prophet of God, in some degree responsible. He did not hesitate to lay his ax to the root of the tree, if the tree, in his judgment, ought to be cut down. His zeal for law was only a method of attaining the true ideal of righteousness both in individuals and in the Church. With an apostolic passion for righteousness, he preached salvation through the gospel of Jesus Christ. In a word, all the energies of his life were concentrated to the task of making the world that is the sort of world that ought to be.

A critic of the great English dramatist has said that the key to "Hamlet" is

"The time is out of joint; O cursed spite,  
That ever I was born to set it right!"

"Shakespeare," continues the critic, "sought to depict a great deed laid upon a soul unequal to the performance of it. In this view I find the piece composed throughout."

"A beautiful, pure, and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which makes the hero, sinks beneath the burden which it can neither bear nor throw off. Every duty is holy to him—this too hard. The impossible is required of him—not the impossible in itself, but the impossible to him."

But the failure of Hamlet, as represented by this critic, was unknown to John Tillett. Like Hamlet, he saw the world out of joint; but, believing that the gospel of Jesus Christ had power to rectify all its ills, he accepted it as a stern duty that to him had been committed the task to set it right, at least that part of it for which he felt morally responsible, under his divine commission, and to which he felt it his stern duty to preach a faithful and full gospel. And the conscience and the courage that this moral hero put into the task became the unceasing wonder of those among whom he labored, and the very people who sometimes sought to slay this prophet—slay him, that is, with their severe criticisms—would in after years honor and praise him for his fidelity to duty and build a monument to his memory.

This fact explains in no small degree his frequent returns to pastoral charges which he had previously served. For the best fruits of his ministry often did not appear until after he had left a pastoral charge; then the people saw his worth and the value to a community of such a gospel as he had preached.

Mr. Tillett was a diligent student of the Word of God and prepared his sermons with great care. He studied the text and made sure of the accuracy of his exegesis. From the viewpoint of the sermonic art many of his sermons, written out in full as they were (and he left many in manuscript), are worthy of a place with the best. But the things in his sermons that made them most impressive and famous consisted in the application of his text and his sermons to present and surrounding conditions in the community, and these, as a rule, were extempore additions to his written exegetical or expository thoughts on the text.

Furthermore, the man behind the text and the sermon must be taken into the account. When he preached the people said, "It thundered," because a moral giant had spoken. His words when discussing social evils and personal righteousness, and the issues of eternal life and death, were ablaze with passion and hurled forth by the dynamic of a profound moral conviction; for he who lived constantly with a keen and solemn sense of obligation in the

discharge of each and every duty as he saw it was especially bold to utter the truth, let it cut where it might and whom it might. He had the courage of his convictions and attacked the sins of the people—not the sins of those far away, but of the people in his own community and his own congregation.

This he did without calling names, but in such plain terms that the identity of the offenders was clearly revealed, especially if they were notorious for their corruption or wrongdoing.

He believed in and preached civic righteousness. He was an anti-saloon preacher of the very strongest type for a half century before the Anti-Saloon League was organized. He preached against the cruelties of slavery, and especially against the heartless "nigger trader," who bought negroes and transported them whithersoever he found he could sell them for the largest profit, thereby heartlessly separating husband and wife, parent and child. Men who went into bankruptcy to get out of paying honest debts and men who failed in business in order to make money by their own failures received his unqualified condemnation publicly uttered—not calling any names, of course, but the hearers understood. Gamblers and all forms of gambling in the community where he lived were certain to be described, exposed, and denounced by him in no ambiguous or uncertain terms when he preached.

And how the people in the community did talk over John Tillett's sermons—over some of them at least! And yet some of them were as gentle and sweet as a mother's soothing song; and whenever commendation or praise was in his judgment called for it was never wanting.

VI

AN EXAMPLE OF HIS METHODS AND  
HIS PREACHING





## VI

### AN EXAMPLE OF HIS METHODS AND HIS PREACHING

MANY times as we follow John Tillett in the course of his ministry do we have our attention called to the fact that he opposed and preached against dancing, card-playing, theater-going, attending circuses, and other forms of popular amusement which he considered worldly and sinful. He did not believe in trying to discriminate among these things, but in letting them all go. They were all, in his judgment, too interlocked with hurtful associations and evil tendencies to make it possible to select and separate the good from the evil. Better miss a little possible good than to run the risk of being seriously and permanently injured by the many unmistakable elements of social and moral evil in questionable amusements. This was the theory which he preached to others and practiced in his own family. He was perfectly frank in all of this, just as he was in the discussion of all other subjects. Many regarded him as needlessly and excessively strict in his ideas on these subjects and in his insistence upon Christians avoiding not only evil, but, as far as possible, even the appearance of evil.

We cite an incident just here that will serve to  
(95)

illustrate his method of dealing with offenders both privately and in public discourse, whether the offense had to do with worldly amusements or the grosser sins of the day.

It so happened that in one of his pastorates one of the most prominent and influential officials of his Church, a young professor in a local school, was in the habit of attending certain social gatherings where dancing and card-playing constituted a large part of the entertainment, though he did not himself participate in either of these diversions, which were condemned by the Methodist Church. The preacher remonstrated privately with the young man and urged him to abstain from attending these entertainments, both for his own sake and for the sake of his example and influence upon others. But the young Methodist official, for reasons satisfactory to himself, continued to attend the dances. This and other occurrences in the community called forth from the preacher a characteristic sermon, an outline of which has been preserved and which we here reproduce.

The text upon this particular occasion was Mark xiv. 54, "And Peter followed him afar off, even into the palace of the high priest: and he sat with the servants, and warmed himself at the fire."

"There are two points in the text," began the minister, "that we shall endeavor to make prominent

and impressive: (1) The following at a distance, (2) the warming by the fire."

He dwelt at length upon the first division of the sermon. Among other things the preacher pointed out that "Peter's following at a distance indicated his unwillingness to be identified with Christ and his cause on this perilous occasion. Peter saw his Master in the hands of an infuriated mob, clamoring for his blood. It was indeed a scary time, and it could but jeopardize a man's life to identify himself with Christ and his cause at that time. Peter consulted his own safety and pusillanimously withdrew from all positions where he might be recognized as a follower of Christ. He evidently dropped back to make the impression that he was not identified with Christ and his cause and did not wish to take part in the conflict then so violently raging among the people." The preacher's exposition continued:

We at a great distance from that turbulent scene may be inclined to denounce Peter in severe terms and claim for ourselves greater courage and fortitude. But before we deal out denunciations against Peter, let us see where we stand. It may be that some of us, as pronounced as Peter in our professed allegiance to Christ, have failed utterly when the cause of Christ demanded self-denial, cross-bearing, courage, patience, or a course of conduct at variance with the worldly and sinful times in which we live.

Peter was found in the company of sinful men and women. Where are we in regard to those things which distinguish good

Christians that are alive and rightly related to the cause of religion from those who are indifferent or, it may be, hostile to religion? Where are we when the people of God are called away from their secular business, pleasures, and enjoyments to attend to the interests of the Church? Where do we stand on the temperance question, the greatest reform since the day of Martin Luther? Where are we when money is demanded to support the gospel, to build churches, schools, and colleges and to send the gospel of Christ to the heathen world? Have you who profess to be followers of Christ broken ranks in these matters, so that no one can identify you as those who offer themselves and their substance to advance the cause of Christ? Remember that Peter fell back to save his life! How much more guilty are we who fall back to save our money, our good standing in society, our popularity with the world, and access to scenes of fashion and amusement! You find it easy to look back and see how Peter "followed Christ afar off." But see also where you stand as related to Christ in those things that involve you in difficulties, reproaches, hardships.

The second point for consideration was, "Peter's warming himself at the fire." The speaker continued:

The next step with Peter after following afar off was to warm himself at the enemy's fire. Peter had no comfort in his conduct. His shirking of duty and danger was well calculated to make him feel bad. He was self-condemned. He was a coward, and nothing degrades a man in his own estimation more than conscious cowardice, nor will anything make him curse and swear more. He was out in the cold; and having no comfort in himself, he ventures up near the fire around which the enemies and haters of Jesus were standing. What harm was it to warm by their fire? But somehow, while he was warming by the fire of the enemies of his Lord, his resolution

and courage grew weaker. His manhood forsook him, and he was afraid almost of his own shadow. We do not undertake to show how his warming had such an effect. But the record puts it down as a step toward swearing and lying. Warming at the enemy's fire and cursing seem here to bear to each other the relation of cause and effect.

Now, as then, the enemies of godliness, the votaries of the world, the haters of pure and undefiled religion, have their fires blazing out everywhere within reach of all professors of religion. These pleasures address themselves to our feelings, propensities, natural appetites, passions, and cravings of nature. They are means of relief invented for guilty consciences and to make those with no religious enjoyment feel comfortable and contented with their sinful state. But for these fires to warm by the wicked would be so tormented with self-reproach and shame that they would flee to Christ for relief from their intolerable burdens and distress.

Let us notice some of those worldly fires at which the straggling disciples of Jesus in our day stop to warm themselves, and where, while warming themselves, they lose their courage and resolution and yield themselves more fully to the world, the flesh, and the devil.

The greatest fire of an enemy that has ever been kindled in our land, and the most powerfully attractive, is the saloon with its intoxicating liquors and sensual and social temptations. These fires are burning in large numbers in cities, towns, villages, crossroads, and in liquor-wagons that traverse the country far and wide and, like the devil himself, go to and fro, seeking whom they may warm, madden, and devour. Some keep these fires burning at home in barrels, demijohns, jugs, and decanters. Some carry chunks in their pockets and bosoms and keep the steam up all the time. This alcoholic fire has the most bewitching effect in intoxicat-



ing the brain, making some who are terribly in debt feel, for the time being, as if they did not owe a dollar in the world, as if they were possessors of princely fortunes. Men who leave home in a pleasant humor warm themselves at these fires of hell and come home like infuriated demons. Alas for wife and children when the husband warms himself at the grogshop instead of at his own domestic altar! And sometimes, alas, even she who is wife and mother warms herself at this alcoholic fire, which is surely woman's greatest enemy in that it so often robs her of a husband's support and love, and no woman who herself frequents this forbidden fire ever fails to disgrace both herself and her family.

Another fire at which young gentlemen and ladies warm themselves when they are out in the cold and have no religion to comfort them is found at dances, balls, revels, frolics, tournaments, circuses, theaters, and such like. The Methodist Church has lifted up its warning notes against all these fires, because it knows that those that warm at them, like Peter, will lose their courage and resolution in the divine service and eventually fall into the currents of worldliness, irreligion, and ungodliness.

This outline is a fair example of John Tillett's style of preaching and of his methods of applying Scripture truth to his own congregation and to the shortcomings and sins of the people in his own community, not sparing his own members, and least of all the official members of the Church, who should be "ensamples of the flock."

The climax of this particular sermon, however, was reached only when the preacher came to describe the inconsistencies and dangers of a pro-

fessing Christian who would attend wine parties and champagne suppers, but would not himself drink; who would watch gamblers at their games, but would not himself gamble; who would go to dances and card parties, but would not himself dance or play cards.

While the sermon was being preached, the young steward who was guilty of the last named of these inconsistencies was in his usual place on the front seat. The sermon made a lasting impression upon all who heard it, and most of all, as we can well imagine, upon this young man himself. The preacher felt that his young steward in particular, holding as he did such a position of influence among the young people of the community, ought not only to stand by the rules of his Church, but to set an example that could be safely followed by all. Others, following his example in "warming at the fires of the enemy," would fail to stop where the young professor did, but would be led at length to leave their Church, to deny their Lord, and return to a life of worldliness and sin.

And yet it should be added, to show the other side of John Tillett's character, that there was no breach of confidence and friendship between the pastor and this young layman. When it turned out that the young layman, although warming himself at their fires, like Peter, did not, like Peter, fall, but stood

true to his Lord and to his Church, the preacher came to appreciate and greatly admire the young man, so much so that when he moved to a Western State and established a school of his own the preacher underwent the extra expense involved and sent one of his own sons to his school and kept him there until he was prepared for college. And betwixt this young teacher and his former pastor there remained, as long as John Tillett lived, the closest relation of friendship. But the young man never forgot how hot his pastor made that fire at which Peter warmed himself! He often talked about the sermon, but always with undiminished affection and admiration for the brave, outspoken pastor who, whenever he preached about the sins and shortcomings of those who lived in Bible times, never failed to apply the truths taught to what he believed to be the sins and shortcomings of his own people.

Knowing that the moral value of this incident will be greatly enhanced by introducing the reader to this hitherto nameless young teacher and official in the Church of which John Tillett was pastor, we now make known the fact that it refers to one of the most useful and honored laymen in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South—a man who is still living and who is known among educators as the Thomas Arnold of the South, a teacher whose students, numbered by thousands, are found in almost every

community in the South and Southwest, and many of them in other parts of the United States. We refer to Professor and Ex-United States Senator William R. Webb, of Bellbuckle, Tennessee.\*

The election of this distinguished son of North Carolina to the United States Senate by the Tennessee Legislature a few years ago to fill out an unexpired term was a great but well-deserved honor bestowed on him by the legislature of his adopted State. His career in the United States Senate, although brief, was one of splendid service. The cause of nation-wide prohibition was then (1913) at the front, and his speech before the Senate in behalf of this great cause was one of the most notable and effective delivered before that body during those

---

\*At the time referred to Professor Webb was teaching in an Episcopal school in a town where John Tillett was pastor, and he felt that it was proper and right for him, so long as he was a professor in that school, to attend the entertainments given by or at the school, even though dancing and card parties constituted a part of the entertainment. His pastor differed with him as to what it behooved a Methodist to do under the circumstances. Each had the courage of his convictions and acted accordingly. The preacher preached his convictions, and the layman practiced his. As already stated, they greatly respected each other and remained ever the best of friends. It is from Professor Webb's recollections of that sermon—preached fifty-six years ago—that we are enabled to furnish the foregoing outline of its thought and points of emphasis.

critical days when the cause for which John Tillett, the temperance pioneer and apostle, pleaded all his life was hanging in the balance. Whatever the young professor in North Carolina may have done by way of "warming himself at their fires," when he was a young steward and was mingling perilously, as his pastor thought, with the dancers and card players, he certainly was as far from "warming himself at their fires" when it came to fighting the liquor forces in Tennessee and in the United States Senate as his old pastor could have desired.

There is perhaps no higher tribute to be paid to the "Iron Duke" concerning whom we are writing than to say that Ex-Senator Webb regards him, when all things are considered, as one of the strongest, most courageous, effective, and influential preachers of the gospel whom he has ever known. And perhaps there is no better confirmation that we ourselves can give to Senator Webb's high estimate of John Tillett's large and lasting influence as a preacher than to say that it is because in traveling far and wide over the State of North Carolina we have found the moral fruits of his ministry so prevalent and so great at the end of a third of a century after his death that we have felt it an imperative duty to put on record and preserve from oblivion the story of a life work so abounding in moral achievement and so inspirational in value as was the



life of this modest but heroic Methodist preacher. Suppose we concede that he magnified some evils out of proportion to their real demerits and dangers—others being judges—it must also be remembered that he magnified and insisted upon all those elements and ideals of religion and ethics the preaching and practice of which make the men and women of worth whose membership and work in the Church are its crown and glory.

John Tillett, again, was opposed to the use of tobacco and sometimes gave his views on the subject in preaching, that he might influence young men against a habit which he considered detrimental to the highest ideal of Christian character and to the greatest usefulness of the individual as well as to the best interests of the kingdom of God. He regarded the use of tobacco as a useless and hurtful form of self-indulgence, oftener than otherwise injurious to health, and always a waste of money needed for worthy causes, and therefore inconsistent with his ideal of the self-denying religion of Christ, which he felt it to be his duty not only to practice, but to preach.

An amusing story is told of an incident that occurred in connection with one of his public deliverances against the use of tobacco.

On one occasion he was preaching in a country church, when Rev. Lewis K. Wiley, a well-known and



very popular old bachelor, local preacher, sat in the pulpit behind him. Mr. Wiley was much given to the use of tobacco, both chewing and smoking, and was addicted to chewing in church during the preaching hour (a custom common among tobacco users worshipping in country churches in those old days), nor did he allow the fact that he was sitting in the pulpit behind the preacher to prevent him from indulging in his cherished habit during the sermon. Brother Wiley usually carried a good-sized plug or long roll of tobacco in his pocket.

In the midst of this particular sermon the preacher was setting forth the nature of Christian self-denial and things inconsistent therewith in the Christian life as he interpreted it and was stating his opposition to the use of tobacco. Just as the preacher was getting to the subject of tobacco Brother Wiley was seen to pull out a long roll of tobacco, and with repeated and strenuous efforts he succeeded in biting off the end of the roll in full view of every one except the preacher. He did not once think of the relation his performance bore to the words of the preacher until it was too late. The audience broke out in laughter at the ludicrousness of the picture before them. The preacher thought they were laughing at him for preaching against tobacco. This aroused his righteous indignation, and he expressed his ire in vigorous terms, such as only John Tillett

could employ when he thundered against the sins of the times and of the people before him in the pew. Some might be laughed down, but not he!

At the conclusion of the service some one made haste to inform the preacher that the congregation was not laughing at him, but at Mr. Wiley's biting off the end of a great roll of tobacco while he was condemning the use of it. Upon learning this he, too, laughed not less heartily than had the audience at what had occurred. For the preservation of this amusing incident we are indebted to the remarkably vivid memory of that same young professor who was described by his pastor as "warming himself at the enemy's fire."



VII

THE IMPRESS AND IMPACT OF HIS  
CHARACTER AND HIS  
PREACHING



## VII

### THE IMPRESS AND IMPACT OF HIS CHARACTER AND HIS PREACHING

THE Iron Duke was no city preacher—for in his day there were no city pastors in North Carolina. Not through lack of ability, for some of them were princes in the pulpit, but because there were no cities in the State of North Carolina in the days of his prime in the ministry.

In 1839, when John Tillett joined the Conference, Newbern had a population of only 3,699; Fayetteville, 4,285; Wilmington, 4,747; Raleigh, 2,244; Charlotte was a little larger than Raleigh, while Greensboro and Salisbury followed close behind the capital numerically. And these were, at that time, the largest towns in the State. All others were mere country villages with a few stores, a blacksmith shop or two, and the county seats had a courthouse and a jail and a whipping post. Furthermore, none of these towns were characterized by a rapid growth until twenty years after the close of the Civil War, when the present era of growth and prosperity for the Old North State began.

There are several characteristics of the people among whom Mr. Tillett labored that it may be of interest just here to refer to.



In those days the great majority of the people lived on the farms, and their one industry was agriculture. Manufacturing, as a distinct industry, was for the most part unknown among them, although much of it was actually carried on in practically every household and upon all the plantations, but without a thought of its being anything more than a part of the agricultural life of the people; for most households were engaged in the manufacture of woolen, cotton, and linen goods for wearing apparel. Not only was the clothing, even to hats and shoes, made at home; but the implements of agriculture, plows, hoes, harrows, and all such like things were made on the farms or in the shops of the villages and the cross-roads. The utter lack of transportation facilities, if there had been no other consideration, made such life an absolute necessity.

In this day of the automobile, with sand-clay and hard-surface roads in every section of the State and trunk line railroads easily in reach of all, it is hard to conceive of conditions eighty-seven years ago when John Tillett became a Methodist preacher. The roads—so called for want of a more appropriate name—were rough in summer and often impassable in winter. And the only means of getting produce to market was by hauling it in wagons over these all but impassable roads to Charleston or Camden, S. C., Fayetteville and Wilmington, N. C., and

Petersburg, Va. Petersburg, at that time, was a great tobacco market, where the farmers rolled their tobacco in hogsheads.

Eighty-seven years ago railroads in North Carolina, as in every other part of the world, were in their infancy. The Wilmington and Weldon Railroad, chartered in 1833 and completed several years later, was the longest railroad anywhere up to that time constructed under one charter. The Raleigh and Gaston road entered Raleigh in 1840. Ground was broken at Greensboro in 1851 for the North Carolina Railroad, which ran from Charlotte through Greensboro and Raleigh into Eastern Carolina.

In fact, up to the middle of the nineteenth century transportation facilities were such that the marketing consumed all the profits in agriculture, and some freely prophesied that North Carolina would never become a great commercial State.

This opinion on the part of not a few seemed to be confirmed by the constant emigration, which reduced the gain in population in the State from 1833 to 1840 to two and a half per cent. The tides of emigration flowed continuously into the great Middle West, where free lands and the enticing stories of the fertility of the soil caused the people to go by the thousands never to return. It has been said that in 1845 one-third of the people of Indiana were from North Carolina. Even now one can find the de-

scendants of North Carolinians in practically every community from the Appalachian Mountains to the Golden Gate on the west and Canada in the north.

Yet, in spite of the utter lack of means of transportation and the heavy drain through emigration, there were until the Civil War evidences of progress in the Old North State, especially in education and religion. For there was a growing desire on the part of the more progressive citizens for a better system of education in the State. The "old field" school, with its haphazard methods and limited curriculum, to say nothing of incompetent teachers, had served a good purpose in giving large numbers of the youth of the country an acquaintance with the "three R's, reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic," but this method of education had come to be recognized as inadequate. And foremost among the leaders in an effort for a better system were the ministers of the gospel.

If evidence of this should be desired, it can be found in the fact that the Churches were leaders in the establishment of schools and colleges, as we have already had occasion to observe. Wake Forest, a Baptist College, opened its doors in 1834; Davidson, a Presbyterian College, and Guilford, a Quaker College, in 1837; Normal College, which a few years later became Trinity College, a Methodist institution, was established in 1838; Greensboro, a Methodist college for girls, began its work of education in 1846.

With these evidences of educational progress came the organization of the Baptist State Convention and also the organization of the North Carolina Conference, which indicated a growing sense of unity and a desire for increased effectiveness on the part of these Churches in the State. It was also a period of numerical gain for the Methodist Church, which in 1840 had in the North Carolina Conference approximately fifteen thousand members, while twenty years later the membership was thirty thousand. To double its membership in twenty years amid the constant drain through emigration is a remarkably fine showing.

And among those consecrated spirits and men of outstanding ability who were ushering in a new day for public schools, building colleges, and doubling the membership of the Methodist Church was John Tillett, whose remarkable life of loyalty and service to the Church extended beyond the trying days of the Civil War and spanned those memorable years of reconstruction when poverty and lawlessness sat enthroned upon the wrecks of war, and the Iron Duke became a leader among those heroic spirits who, though cramped by poverty, battled bravely for the right and all the finer things of life.

And wherever he labored one would naturally and logically expect the influence of John Tillett to

abide even through successive generations. And it was so.

In Iredell County, where he began his itinerant career and where he returned later for two other pastorates, the traditions of his matchless service linger among those foothills and are often fondly recalled by his former parishioners and their neighbors; and their children, now grown to manhood and womanhood, repeat them as among the most vivid recollections of their childhood in connection with preachers of a former generation.

The town of Durham witnessed some of the stormiest days of his long and eventful life, but after the storms came the sunshine and a better day that abides. Many of those in that community who had taken offense at his plain preaching and had joined in the criticism and opposition raised against him came later to see and to acknowledge that his brave ministry and courageous denunciations of prevalent sins had cleared and purified the moral atmosphere of the place like a terrific moral thunderstorm and laid the ethical foundations for a better type of citizenship and a cleaner, purer type of social life in the entire community. The gospel of gentleness and love had its place in his ministry, but not until after the besetting sins and corrupting vices of the people had been probed and the surgeon's knife applied.



Among the members of the Methodist Church living at Durham when John Tillett was the pastor, one is worthy of special mention. Dr. Wilbur F. Tillett, writing at our request of this period of his father's life, has referred to this honored Methodist and well-known citizen of Durham in words which we do well to quote:

My father's pastorate at Durham covered from the fifteenth to the seventeenth year of my life. At the end of this period he was sent by the Bishop to Lumberton, and I went to Trinity College and entered the Freshman class, where I had Walter Hines Page, Joseph G. Brown, Will R. Odell, and other cherished friends as classmates.

Among the plain, sturdy, straightforward members of the Methodist Church at Durham at that time whom my father esteemed most highly for their sterling character was the late Washington Duke, to whose generosity Trinity College is indebted for the funds that made possible its removal from its former rather inaccessible location in Randolph County to its present advantageous and commanding site in the town of Durham. This man, whose name is now so justly and so highly honored in North Carolina Methodism, was typically American in that he rose from obscurity and poverty by dint of diligence, economy, and business foresight to a place of large influence in the commercial world. And yet the business success and wealth which he attained was but small compared with the much larger wealth and financial eminence that has been attained by his two sons, James B. and Benjamin, whom he took into copartnership with him and trained in business which expanded greatly after the death of Washington Duke. These sons owe their great success in the



financial world in no small degree to the plain, sturdy Christian character of their father. He was a man not of many words, but of deeds; and he was often heard to speak in high terms of approval and admiration of the courageous character and the plain preaching of his pastor, the itinerant preacher whom you describe as "the Iron Duke of the Methodist itinerancy."

And, by the way, there comes to me, as I think of Mr. Washington Duke, a vivid recollection I have of hearing him later in life tell of how in the humble and toilsome days of poverty when as a farmer he took his crop of tobacco to Raleigh in a covered wagon and sold it for what would later have been considered a bare pittance. He said that on these trips he always bought and brought back with him a good supply of brown sugar; and on arriving at home and unloading he would place a pound or two of the brown sugar on a sheet of wrapping paper on the floor in the middle of the room and bid his children help themselves. He said it was fun to see "Buck and Ben" go for that brown sugar. This was when "Buck and Ben" were small boys. They are multimillionaires now; but these boys, now grown to be men of great wealth, still have, we have good reason for believing, their father's high opinion of the good and great work done by itinerant Methodist circuit riders; and Durham, now grown large and great, was in those days simply one of several preaching places on a circuit. One of the much appreciated characteristics of these sons of Washington Duke is their deep interest in the old and superannuated Methodist preachers, while what they have done and are still doing for Trinity College constitutes one of the greatest present and prospective educational assets not only of North Carolina Methodism, but of the entire Southern Methodist Church.

At one time and another John Tillett traveled wide stretches of Eastern Carolina about Beaufort, Tarboro, Smithfield, Henderson, Carthage, Rockingham, and other important points; and everywhere he labored the descendants of those to whom he ministered in holy things hold his name in grateful remembrance.

Rev. W. L. Sherrill, of the Western North Carolina Conference, at one time stationed at Mocksville, the county seat of Davie County, as pastor of the Methodist Church, is a man of rare gifts in the estimate of historical values and in the accurate delineation of character. Mr. Sherrill has this to say of John Tillett:

He is remembered in Davie County as a veritable preacher of the law and of the terrible end of the impenitent sinner. He was as uncompromising in his attitude against evil as was John the Baptist. He was a stickler for rigid observance of the rules of the Church. He was a terror to the liquor drinker and the liquor seller, but his earnestness was so tense that he overpowered the distiller with argument and appeal to conscience, in an age when it was not a violation of public sentiment to make and sell and drink the accursed stuff.

Two men in Davie County who were distillers were persuaded by him to renounce the business. They both became very devout and very useful local preachers, and their descendants to the third and fourth generations are now loyal and trusted members of the Church, and several of them are now official members of the Mocksville Church.

I do not think that "Uncle Tillett," as many young people

fondly called him, was always tactful; but he was always honest and courageous, and he commanded the confidence of men, which gave power to his utterance. An indication of his popularity was that parents in large numbers named their children for him. He was an old-fashioned Methodist who held to the class meeting and the Friday fast day and was one of a line of circuit riders who laid the foundations of a solid Methodist citizenship in Davie, Iredell, and other counties where he preached. A remarkable man was he—educated, consecrated, courageous to the point of daring, afraid of nothing but sin, every inch a man—foursquare, true to God, his fellows, and himself.

Nathan, one of the Old Testament prophets, enjoys a wide and justly earned reputation for direct and pointed rebuke of offenders, especially of those in high places; but in John Tillett was to be found the equal of that fearless Hebrew prophet. What John Knox was to Scotland John Tillett was to North Carolina Methodism. From every section of the State where the Church sent this circuit rider to labor come even to this distant day echoes of the sledge-hammer blows that he struck for God and righteousness. Nor was the influence of his life and ministry confined to the Methodist Church.

Mr. A. R. Foushee, a prominent citizen and Baptist layman of Roxboro, North Carolina, writes:

Rev. John Tillett, pastor of the Person Circuit, Methodist Episcopal Church, South, about 1862 or 1863 (I think), made his home in Roxboro during these years. He was a man of solid character and honest convictions, a terror to

evildoers, a great foe to whisky in every form, advocate of temperance and prohibition, often referring to this subject in his sermons. He insisted on honesty among the people in their dealings with each other, was faithful in his work as pastor of his Churches, also as a fellow citizen, and was popular with the best people of the community. He was true in his devotion to the cause of the South during the Civil War; a good preacher and helper in every good word and work.

Rev. R. F. Bumpas, one of the leading and most highly esteemed members of the North Carolina Conference and a man with the gift of accuracy in his recollections of men and events, gives his estimate of Mr. Tillett as follows:

I knew Brother Tillett well. He was a frequent guest in my mother's home in my childhood. He was a Methodist preacher of the stalwart type—no compromise with him. He believed in a positive religion, holiness of heart and life, family piety, no worldliness. He was a man of dauntless courage. He made war on sin wherever found and carried the war into the camp of the enemy. He was particularly outspoken against the prevailing forms of iniquity, against intemperance and the liquor traffic.

Rev. Jesse Cuninggim, who was of all his ministerial brethren most intimately associated with him during the last years of his life, said:

John Tillett was a remarkably strong and successful Methodist preacher. In an important sense he was unique. His sense of obligation in observing his vows as a Methodist preacher both in the spirit and the letter was intense. In preaching the word of God as embodied in the General Rules,

and in enforcing the Discipline, as he construed it to apply to the flock over which the Holy Ghost had made him an overseer, he had no peer in the North Carolina Conference. During his last pastorate he made this statement: "The Master knows all; he approves, and I am willing to meet my record at his bar." His conscience compelled him to "cry aloud and spare not." He preached his convictions without regard to the social character or position of any offender. The purity of the Church was greatly improved wherever he labored, while many were added to it under his ministry, such as shall be forever saved.

But the man who, on account of long personal acquaintance and intimate associations with John Tillett in his prime, is best of all qualified to give a true and just estimate of his old friend and pastor, is one to whom reference has already been made—Hon. William R. Webb, founder of the famous Webb School at Bellbuckle, Tennessee, who began his illustrious career as a teacher in his native State, but moved in 1870 to Tennessee, where his phenomenal work during the past half century has become an important part of the history of education in the South.\*

---

\*We yield to the temptation to insert here one among the many unique and interesting incidents characteristic of the experience and work of this remarkable teacher of boys. It is of the early days of his school in Tennessee, when times were hard and the people had little money. The fees in those days were paid more frequently in "kind" than in cash. A boy from the backwoods hill country came to the school one



One needs only to hear Professor Webb talk of his old friend and pastor of other years to realize how profoundly John Tillett left the impress of his life and ministry upon those who came under his influence and heard him preach those impassioned sermons that burned with moral courage and that made no compromises with unrighteousness.

Mr. Webb writes as follows:

My father and mother were members of the Methodist Church. John Tillett was the preacher on that circuit in my infancy, and I was baptized by him. I have often heard my parents speak of him with great love and admiration.

He was a man of great decision of character and of undaunted and indomitable courage, preaching the truth of the gospel without fear or favor. Brother Tillett preached against the sins of the people with whom he was associated and preached with great power. He preached against the theater, against the circus, against dancing, against all worldly and sinful

---

day dragging by a rope halter a heifer almost as scrawny as the boy himself and pleaded: "Mr. Webb, I want to go to school. I ain't got no money; but I wonder if you will let me 'larn up' this cow?" He was allowed to "larn up" that cow, while the boy boarders ate up the cow in the form of regulation roast beef and good old-fashioned boarding house hash. And the schooling made a man of that boy, as it has done of many other boys who have "larned up" cows and hogs and sheep and mules and corn and wheat and other commodities which were received as payment of fees "in kind." Professor Webb is best known among his students as "Old Sawney." It is with them a term of endearment.



amusements, against extravagance in habits of life, in dress, against luxurious self-indulgence; hence he brought about a great deal of antagonism against himself personally.

While he was traveling a circuit including a small town which has since become a flourishing city, he once, on an inclement Sabbath, had as part of his small congregation six or seven tobacco buyers who had gone into bankruptcy to get out of paying honest debts which the preacher thought they were able to pay and should pay. Brother Tillett took for his text, "Pay what thou owest." He preached vigorously and forcefully on the debts which men owe first to God and secondly to their fellow men, and among the latter he included not only social and religious obligations, but just financial debts. He then asked the oratorical question, "How would a bankrupt feel walking the golden streets of heaven—one who had gone into bankruptcy to get out of paying an honest debt?"

As a consequence of this sermon, and like utterances made elsewhere, he was charged with unwarranted personalities in the pulpit, and even with untruthfulness, by the men whom he had offended, and they brought charges against him for falsehood and slander. The offending preacher, as a result of these charges, was called to trial before an ecclesiastical court. When the farmers of the surrounding country heard of it, they came for twenty miles around to the trial to back Brother Tillett up. These men had received bankrupt notices in payment for their tobacco. Such a multitude possibly had never before assembled at a Church trial in that vicinity. That eminent Christian lawyer and cultured gentleman, Judge John W. Hayes of Oxford, acted as his counsel. It is needless to say that the accused preacher was acquitted. Public sentiment demanded it. Some of his comments and criticisms on the bankrupts might have been

needlessly severe, but they were not proved to be untrue. The trial added to, rather than detracted from, his moral power in the community.

Mr. Webb continues:

In my efforts to found a school in Tennessee, in the days of saloons and distilleries and breweries, I oftentimes became greatly distressed over questions of discipline and oftentimes was almost in despair in my discouragement. In one period of great depression of spirits, I went back to my old country home at "The Oaks," Orange County, North Carolina. Father Tillett was then the pastor on that circuit. He preached four miles from my mother's home on a hot, sultry August afternoon. I remember that I almost fainted as I rode an old farm plug horse in a slow walk through the broiling sun to hear my old pastor again. He took for his text, "Let us not be weary in well doing; for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not." His sermon was, as usual, *sui generis*. There was nobody else like him. I remember the scorn he expressed for a weakling who had no more backbone than a limp piece of calico or a fishing worm. His sermon was truly characteristic of the preacher and thoroughly adapted to my state of feeling; and I went home stimulated and prepared by that sermon to take up my work afresh, no matter what might be the discouragement or sacrifice.

Professor Webb relates one other story which we must insert:

Just after the Civil War, in that section of the State where Johnson surrendered, both armies left that country stripped of everything; crops were destroyed, smokehouses were bare, poultry yards were empty. There were no goods in the stores, and few work animals or animals of any description were left in the country. Virtually there was nothing left but dirt,

John Tillett's circuit lay in that devastated district. He had a growing family of several children who needed training and education. He himself was a member of the second Freshman Class that entered Randolph-Macon College, where he four years later graduated, and no man set higher value on Christian education than he did. With his own family at an age when it was education now or never, his income was exceedingly slender, barely enough to furnish food for the table.

On one occasion his steward handed him a twenty-dollar gold piece, which was an unusually large sum in those days for anybody to have, much less to pay the preacher. His steward told him that it had been sent him by a saloon keeper in the neighborhood. Brother Tillett divined the motive in the gift. With distilleries innumerable in the community and with saloons at almost every crossroad, he had assailed the liquor traffic with such vigor as only a man with his strong and forceful character could. He took the twenty-dollar gold piece, rode to the saloon, called the saloon keeper out to the road and returned it to him. He told him that he did not care to have his family supported by money earned in that way. This is the first time that I ever heard of tainted money.

This tribute of a Methodist layman like William R. Webb to a Methodist itinerant preacher like John Tillett certainly makes interesting reading. The last incident referred to by Mr. Webb became so famous and was so often referred to by friends and acquaintances of John Tillett that it came to have more than one version; or perhaps it is more accurate to say that two incidents of this kind occurred in the life of this anti-saloon pioneer preacher which are

confused, but which need to be distinguished. Thus we often hear it said that on one occasion a saloon keeper offered Mr. Tillett ten dollars with the remark, "I made this selling liquor," whereupon the resourceful minister is said to have taken the money and, holding it in his hand, looked at the liquor seller and said: "Well, I suppose this money has been serving the devil long enough. I will take it now and make it serve God and his kingdom."

In their recollections of John Tillett, both Rev. Robah F. Bumpas, of the North Carolina Conference, and Mr. A. R. Foushee, of Roxboro, North Carolina, mentioned this incident substantially as last given.

Dr. Wilbur F. Tillett, of Vanderbilt University, in speaking of his father, also refers to it, but explains that the saloon keeper, in the last instance cited, in offering the gift, expressed the approval of the work of the preacher in the community, even if he did condemn him and his business, and at the same time urged him to continue to preach what he thought was right. The preacher felt that under conditions like this he was more likely to influence the saloon keeper for good by taking his money than by refusing it. The sequel proved that he was right, for later the saloon keeper gave up his disreputable business.

Dr. Tillett adds:

This incident in my father's life has often been alluded to

and the remark referred to quoted from him. But it should never be quoted except with some such explanation as I have given. My father never sought or desired the gifts of men engaged in what he regarded as a sinful business; and if such people ever offered him money for his own support or for the work of the Church under conditions that would in any way embarrass him in preaching a full, clean, complete gospel, or in denouncing any and every line of business or form of pleasure that he thought sinful, he declined to take the money. This I knew him to do more than once.

For instance, on one occasion there was conducted by a club or group of men, in the town where he lived at the time, a kind of lottery which my father regarded as a species of gambling; and, as was his custom, he let his views of that business be known in a sermon which he preached. He thought the club with its frequent lotteries was demoralizing the young men of the town. The gentlemen engaged in the lottery chuckled to themselves when they heard of the sermon and said that they would put a quietus on the Methodist parson's objection to their business. Whereupon they proceeded to raise a liberal sum through their lottery, divided it up equally, and sent it to the different pastors of the town as a present from the club. They sent my father, with their compliments, the sum of seventy-five dollars, his share of the proceeds; but they did not know their man. He promptly but politely returned it to them with a note, giving, in plain but courteous words, his views of their business. One other pastor of the town, it was reported, not only accepted his portion, but wrote them a cordial note of thanks for their generous gift.

It was things like this that gave John Tillett moral influence of a far-reaching kind in every community

where he lived and preached. It also caused comment and criticism on every pastoral charge that he ever served during the half century of his itinerant ministry. Though he has been dead now for nearly thirty-five years, there can still be heard stories and traditions about him and his preaching, all illustrating, with varying degrees of accuracy, traits of ministerial character such as those here portrayed.





VIII  
THE EVANGELISTIC PASTOR



## VIII

### THE EVANGELISTIC PASTOR

METHODISM had its beginning, not, as is frequently asserted, in the Holy Club, at Oxford, but in the warmed heart of John Wesley. This warming of his heart was to Wesley a "strange" experience, but to his followers it became a familiar, if not a commonplace, occurrence.

Furthermore, that spiritual experience of John Wesley, which marked the beginning of Methodism, was at the same time the birth-hour of a new evangelism. Not only did John Wesley become a flaming evangelist, but the men associated with him and those Wesleyan preachers who came after him were on fire with evangelistic fervor and became effective messengers to a sinful and lost world.

This was emphatically true on the American continent, where society was in a plastic state, free from the restraints of fixed customs and habits which characterized an older and more highly organized social life. That primitive civilization, unpolished, but at the same time unsophisticated and unspoiled, welcomed all and set an open door before every man. The great virgin continent, whose widely scattered pioneers were full of hope, unsatisfied, but unafraid, and who dared great things, be-

came the broad and inviting territory for the Methodist preacher, with his typical gospel message which always laid emphasis upon repentance and faith and upon a direct witness of the Holy Spirit.

And it is truly amazing how the work spread as these men, most of them young men with little experience, except the experience of the love of God in their hearts, went preaching and organizing Churches wherever the pioneer settler had pitched his cabin in the wilderness.

The Methodist Episcopal Church in America, organized at the "Christmas Conference" in Baltimore in 1784, set itself at once to the task of covering every part of the country, no matter how sparsely settled, with a net work of circuits and under the matchless leadership of Francis Asbury sent the circuit rider to every nook and corner of this broad land. At the very time that the foundations of the new American nation were being laid, the Methodist preacher was on hand to join as a builder of the nation as well as of the kingdom of God.

And these early Methodists, with their new emphasis upon evangelism, were tremendously in earnest and at the same time were fully persuaded that the King's business required haste.

What Bishop Coke recorded in his Journal concerning Hope Hull, a young itinerant preacher, re-

veals the true ideal set for Methodist preachers in those early days of our history. Bishop Coke wrote:

Mr. Hull is young, but is indeed a flame of fire. He appears always on the stretch for the salvation of souls. Our only fear concerning him is that the sword is too keen for the scabbard—that he may lay himself out far beyond his strength. Two years ago he was sent to a circuit in South Carolina which we were ready to despair of; but he, with a young colleague (Mastin), of like spirit with himself, raised that circuit to a degree of importance equal to that of almost any in the Southern States.

Of these early Methodists, an old “Ironside” Baptist preacher once said that the Methodists beat any set of folk that he ever saw—that they “would put up a brush arbor, roll a few logs together for seats, nail a book-board between two trees, go to singing and preaching, and have half a dozen folk converted before even the Lord knew what they were doing.”

That may be a bit extravagant, but the story is highly suggestive. Those early Methodist preachers believed with all their hearts in revival meetings and made it their great business to call sinners to repentance. And the ideals and practices of the fathers were still maintained among Methodists in the days of John Tillett; and our Iron Duke, like all true Methodist preachers, knew how to conduct successful revival meetings; for he held some very remarkable revivals in the Churches that he served.



Hitherto little has been said about his work as an evangelist. It would be a grave omission not to speak of it; for the prophet of righteousness, who so frequently encamped upon the slopes of Sinai and got from it some of his fire and his thunder, was familiar also with another mount—the Mount of Redemption—where the Saviour of men was lifted up that he might draw all men unto himself. If he preached much to the people about their sins, he never failed to follow such sermons with an appeal to them to turn away from their sins and to “behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world”; and reminded them how he “came not into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved.”

As a faithful Methodist preacher he held aloft the Cross of Calvary. In him stirred those warm impulses of the Good Shepherd’s heart that sent him after the sheep that were lost. Revival meetings of wonderful power sometimes marked the history of his pastorates. Many of the most useful men and women of Methodism in North Carolina were converted in revivals that took place under his ministry, and that were conducted largely by himself alone, so far as ministerial help was concerned.

Of unusual interest in this connection is one notable revival that occurred while he was a pastor at Oxford, North Carolina, a few years after the close of

the Civil War. Preliminary to a description of the revival are several other items of interest that are really introductory to the vivid story that follows and which we are fortunate to have accurately and fully described by Prof. W. R. Webb, who was, as we have already seen, an official member of that Church at the time. Mr. Webb says:

“When Rev. John Tillett was sent to the Granville Circuit in 1866 as preacher in charge, he found the Methodists in Oxford, where the parsonage was located, worshiping in a shack. They owed it to themselves to have a more commodious, comfortable, and attractive place of worship. Oxford was at the time one of the most prosperous towns in the State of North Carolina. Brother Tillett, Presiding Elder Hendren, and myself met with Mr. J. H. Horner, the principal of the Horner School, and sold him the Methodist Church with all its belongings, the lot included, for one thousand dollars, on condition that it should meet the approval of the trustees. The trustees approved, the old church was immediately delivered to Mr. Horner, and the Methodist congregation began at once the erection of a new church, worshiping in the meantime in the Presbyterian Church, the use of which on alternate Sundays was cordially extended to them by Mr. Hall, the pastor, and his Session. The new church was soon erected in a more desirable part of the town.

In the fall after the dedication Brother Tillett started his protracted meeting without any assistance from other preachers. As was his custom, he vigorously condemned in his preaching the sins of which his congregation were guilty. In those days of distilleries and saloons, church services were frequently disturbed by thoughtless young people and some-

times by older men who were "in their cups." Brother Tillett looked upon church services as a very serious matter and sometimes rebuked with very great severity those who disturbed the service. On one occasion, after several times requesting some young people in the back of the church who were engaged in audible conversation to desist, and his request not being heeded, he left the pulpit, walked to the back of the church, stood in the pew next to them, and said, "I will see that you don't disturb this service any further," and from that point finished his sermon with his back to his audience. It had the desired effect, not only for that particular service, but for other services that followed.

After preaching with great vigor and force for eight or ten days without any visible results, he made what he supposed to be his last talk. He told the people of their sinful lives and of the impending doom before them. He pleaded with very great power for them to change their lives and said that he had done his best, that his skirts were clear, and that when he should meet them at the great judgment he could tell them that he had done his duty to the best of his knowledge and ability. Then he said, "The exercises of this protracted meeting will close with prayer." He led the prayer.

Such a prayer I never heard. Having the habit of kneeling at prayer, I knew of nothing that was going on except his earnest pleadings with God. He seemed to have hold of the horns of the altar. First, a silence that could be felt, afterwards a rustling noise and quite a moving among the people, and when the prayer closed I arose to find that at least one-third of the audience were kneeling at the altar and calling on God for mercy. I have been a member of the Methodist Church for nearly seventy years, and I attended in early life some of the famous camp meetings and revival services of those days, but I never witnessed a scene like this.

Brother Tillett told them that he would continue the meeting, and did so. His services attracted immense audiences, people coming from all over the country. After he worked himself down he sent for Rev. Adolphus W. Mangrum, a young minister of great oratory and fine delivery, who was a member of the Conference and who was, at that time, serving as preacher in charge of Orange Circuit, about fifteen miles from Oxford. He afterwards became Professor of English and Rhetoric in the University of North Carolina. I can recall his sermons to this day and how greatly he aided the exhausted pastor during the continuance of the revival for some three weeks longer. That revival was the beginning of a great forward movement in the Methodist Church at Oxford.

I have never seen a revival equal to it. I have never seen one that even approximated it. It revolutionized Oxford. It revolutionized the county round about. It involved all classes of the community, both young and old. It included among those reached by it the Episcopal school in which I was a teacher. It included the young men and the young ladies of the town and surrounding country. Among those whom I saw at the altar and who professed religion at that meeting was the fourteen-year-old son of the preacher, then a pupil in the Horner School. This fourteen-year-old boy, converted in the Oxford meeting, was none other than Dr. Wilbur F. Tillett, whose broad views and writings on religion have affected the entire Southern country, including all denominations, and a man who has done more for the uplift of the younger ministry of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, than any other man in its history.

An eyewitness has given a graphic account of perhaps the most remarkable episode that ever oc-

curred in connection with a revival conducted by John Tillett. Although it is over half a century since it occurred, it is vividly recalled by every one who was present. The following account of this remarkable incident is furnished by Professor Webb:

There was living in the town at the time this revival occurred a distinguished ex-minister of the gospel and doctor of divinity. He had been raised in that town. His early life had been one of dissipation. He belonged to an Episcopal family of high social standing. He had been converted at a Methodist revival in his young days and, to the surprise of everybody, not only joined the Methodist Church, but became later a minister and member of the North Carolina Conference. I have never met a man better posted in literature than he. He was a polished conversationalist, a fine preacher, an able writer, and filled good appointments in the Conference for one so young. Imagine the surprise of his people when he suddenly announced his decision to join the Baptist Church, and the State was sowed down with a book written by him, entitled "Why I Became a Baptist." He filled afterwards one of the most important appointments in the Baptist Church in this State and later was called to serve as pastor of a prominent Church in a Western State. He had a large family and was dependent entirely upon his salary for support. He had not been away from the State long before he returned unexpectedly with his family, and there was great astonishment and surprise that he was there without employment. It soon became evident why he had returned: he had become a victim of his old habits of dissipation again.

One night he came to the revival meeting which was being conducted by Brother Tillett alone. After a sermon of unusual power and the call for penitents had been given and



great numbers were flocking to the altar, this distinguished ex-divine and doctor of divinity rose on the back seat and said, "Brother Tillett, may I say a word? You know that I used to stand in the pulpit and preach to sinners."

Brother Tillett quickly responded, "Yes, and I want to see you stand there again and preach to sinners," rushed down the aisle to meet him, and, putting his arms around him, carried him up to the pulpit and tried to get him to enter in order that he might say a word. But he paused: he would not go into the pulpit. He turned to the audience—he was one of the handsomest men I ever saw—stood for a long time in perfect silence, with tears running down his cheeks, and finally said: "I will kneel at the altar, where I belong." And with that he fell upon his knees, and Brother Tillett knelt beside him and put his arms about him. The mighty transforming power of divine grace was soon manifest in the result that followed their united prayers, which result was followed a little later by his reception into the Methodist Church as a private member.

It is not difficult to imagine what an impression this scene made upon the large audience that was present and completely filled the house, and indeed upon the whole community and surrounding country, for so marvelous and unprecedented a revival scene as this was quickly noised abroad.

The restoration of this gifted and distinguished man to the fellowship of Christian people was not followed by his re-entering the ministry, but was followed by lifelong fidelity to the vows of Church membership which he then assumed and by a life of modest but useful and honored literary toil. One of his daughters, a most gifted and brilliant woman, married an itinerant Methodist preacher, and his son in turn is now filling a place of great responsibility and high honor in the ministry of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. A tender and beautiful friendship existed ever there-



after between John Tillett and this remarkable man whose checkered career was crowned during the years which followed his reunion with the Church by the respect and honor of all who were associated with him. Many years ago death reunited them in the land where faithful preachers and their converts have blessed and eternal fellowship.

The first task to which John Tillett set himself in beginning a revival was to get the Church right. The sins and immoralities of Church members were more culpable and open to condemnation in his estimation than the sins of those who made no profession to being Christians. Judgment with him began at the house of God. He regarded nothing as more fatal to vital godliness in a community and to the promotion of a revival of pure and undefiled religion for the salvation of sinners than to have the Church to number among its members those whose lives were utterly inconsistent with the vows of Church membership and incompatible with any true profession of personal salvation.

It often happened in pastoral charges to which he was assigned that neighborhood feuds had brought farmers and planters whose lands joined each other into such enmity that they were not on speaking terms, and sometimes he found these personal enemies members of his own Church?\*

---

\*Disagreement over fences dividing neighboring farms was long a fruitful cause of neighborhood and family feuds in the South. Often, therefore, between two adjoining farms in

In a Church and neighborhood whose religious life was marred and scandalized by such unneighborly and unchristian enmities as this he regarded a successful revival of religion as a moral impossibility; and if such conditions as these were found to exist in a pastorate to which he was assigned, they received his first attention. Such conditions must be removed before he felt justified in inviting sinners to come to the altar for prayer. Souls could not be converted in a spiritual ice house or an atmosphere hot with hate. John Tillett's first revival, therefore, was inside the Church, and many of his most useful converts were found among those who were already in the Church. In not a few pastoral charges which he served it turned out that the best work he did during his first year was to Christianize and spiritualize and ethicize the membership of the Church, while revivals of religion that reached outsiders and

---

former days were to be seen two high rail fences where only one was necessary. A little long narrow lane lay between the two. John Tillett frequently referred to such a lane as "the devil's race track," up and down which he described the devil as racing in high glee just so long as he could keep neighbors quarreling so over their respective shares in a common fence that they could not agree; hence each man built his own complete fence. Any cleavage that separates neighbor from neighbor and makes neighborly coöperation and fellowship impossible is "the devil's race track"—so John Tillett preached, and by his preaching and personal pastoral influence he healed many a family feud.

sinners came oftenest during a second or third year. The abiding and grateful affection which many of those who were converted under his ministry cherished for him in after years was evidenced in personal greetings, in friendly personal messages, and in occasional letters which constituted one of the joys of his later life.

And he believed in putting his converts early to work in order to keep them saved; and recognizing that in their conversion they experienced "the expulsive power of a new and divine affection," he also recognized that the mind and heart and hand that had been made void of things sinful by conversion must be quickly filled and continually kept filled with thoughts and loves and duties befitting the new life in Christ, or they were in danger of proving true the one and only doctrine of Methodist theology which should be believed and preached, but never practiced—namely, the doctrine of falling from grace.

He endeavored to encourage and train his converts as far as possible in public and family prayer,\*

---

\*John Tillett used to tell of one unique case he had among the new converts whom he received into the Church following one of his revivals. He told the men who joined the Church at this time that he would expect each one to prepare to lead in public prayer—that he would call in turn on each one at the week-night prayer meeting and would let each man know in advance when he was to be called on, so that he might make

in personal evangelistic work, in habits of generous giving of their means, and in such forms of Church and community work as were open to them and called for by varying conditions and needs.

---

special preparation for his first prayer. Among these converts who promised to lead in prayer was one who before his conversion had long been addicted to profanity, until the use of profane language had become so common with him as to be his natural and ordinary speech. This man wrote out his prayer and, having committed it to memory, held himself ready to respond when called upon. The preacher called on him at the appointed time. He began all right, but could not get beyond the first sentence. After taking a fresh start two or three times and failing to recall the second and following sentences, he gave it up and brought his prayer to an abrupt and early end; whereupon he arose, took his seat, and in his embarrassment was heard to say to the person sitting next to him, "Well, d—— it, I did know it, if I don't know it now." Realizing later what he had done and how utterly inconsistent it was with his new life and the act of worship in which he was engaged to use such language, he went to his pastor in mortification and asked him to remove his name from the church register. But the pastor, to his great surprise, instead of expressing his horror at this great breach of propriety in religious worship, met him kindly and sympathetically and would not hear to his withdrawing from the Church, seeing that he had done no intentional wrong and that his heart was all right. Thus encouraged, the man remained in the Church, got quickly and entirely rid of his long-used vocabulary of profane words, and became a consistent and useful member of the Church.

Unfortunately the Methodist itinerancy, that has so many things to recommend it as a method of meeting the problem of ministerial demand and supply, finds here one of its weakest points, in that it so quickly separates a pastor from his converts in whom, as being in a peculiar sense his spiritual children, he is of course more interested and to whom he can be more helpful than a new and strange pastor can be.

John Tillett not only subsoiled and plowed deep in his revival preaching, but he planted deep the seeds of spiritual truth and moral character and cultivated diligently the young plant that started its growth under his ministry. But he neglected not the souls of any over whom the Holy Ghost made him a bishop and shepherd. He believed in saving people in revivals of religion, but he believed, if anything, still more in saving men by pastoral oversight and care. He believed that the conscientious, faithful, soul-saving pastor who confirms and guides and develops those already saved has a work quite as great and important to do for individuals and for the Church as the preacher whose gifts are great as a soul-winner, but whose work seems to end there. Few preachers that have ever lived and labored in the North Carolina Conference combined both evangelistic and pastoral gifts and graces in such a rare degree as did John Tillett. He believed profoundly in pastoral evangelism.

IX  
IN THE CIRCUIT PARSONAGE





## IX

### IN THE CIRCUIT PARSONAGE

THE public ministry of John Tillett stretched across fifty-one unbroken and eventful years and left an abiding impress for good in practically every section of his Conference. But his public career, though unique and outstanding in so many essential features, was not the measure of his life, was not even the best half of it. His most effectual work was to be found within his own household. The pulpits that he occupied, and from which he thundered like some modern John Knox, invariably became thrones of power in every community where he preached; but the little parsonages in which he and his devoted wife reared their children became radiating centers of influence that have touched the very rim of Christendom.

For twenty-one years the wife of his youth and the mother of his nine children, two of whom died in infancy and a third in early youth, walked joyfully by his side and joined as only a devoted wife and mother can in all the duties and responsibilities of the home. The parsonages of those days were in the main small, poorly furnished, and uncomfortable; the salaries were small, and only by the most rigid economy could the preacher and his family

make ends meet. When it became necessary, as it frequently did, to go in debt, the family lived with the most rigid economy till those debts were all paid.

But in that home with its plain living went high thinking. The library table was kept stocked with the best books and periodicals, even if the pantry and the wardrobe were bare. His children were at all times provided with the very best religious and intellectual advantages.

Although money was scarce and rigid economy the watchword of that household, John Tillett never allowed a monetary consideration to keep him from sending his sons and daughters to the very best schools in reach. Believing, as he did, that the best were in the end the cheapest, he invariably chose, irrespective of cost, what he regarded as the best. And subsequent results amply justify the wisdom of his course.

"My earliest recollection of my father," says Dr. W. F. Tillett, "was when I was between three and four years old and we were living at Ridgeway, North Carolina, in the summer of 1858. When he found it difficult to wake me up one morning, he picked me up, took me out of doors, and started me around the house (the parsonage) barefooted and in my night apparel, he running after me and barking like a dog after a rabbit." This method of dealing

with the sleepy lad soon got him awake and turned the incident into an early morning frolic. This was repeated more than once as a method of waking the drowsy youngster.

The foregoing incident of the nursery reveals a fine knowledge of child psychology and at the same time becomes suggestive of the one unceasing effort of this wise and devoted father to wake up in the largest sense of the term and to prepare those children of his for the great day of opportunity that he believed to be theirs.

One has only to read a few of the letters that he wrote his boys and girls, when students at school and college, to become convinced of his wisdom as a father and his willingness to make all sorts of sacrifices in order that his sons and daughters might enjoy the best educational advantages.

The two letters that follow were written to his daughter Laura soon after she entered Greensboro College as a student—one letter to her having been already introduced in the first chapter.

PITTSBORO, N. C., July 27, 1859.

*Dear Laura:* I was very much pleased with Miss Ellen White, one of your roommates, so far as I had an opportunity of becoming acquainted with her. I sincerely hope that you will get along well with both of your roommates. I am satisfied that Miss White will be entirely agreeable. Please for my sake watch over your temper and curb it. Study to please your roommates and teachers. Be kind and obliging

to the former and obedient to the latter. Sometimes you will be tried, and you will imagine yourself treated amiss owing to being yourself in a sad or fretful mood. When we are in a bad humor everything and everybody seem contrary and provoking. That is the time of all others when you must exert yourself to restrain your feelings and suppress the words that rise up and almost leap out before you are aware of yourself. It is now time for you to obtain control over yourself and no longer give way to whims and pouts and such like. If you indulge in them, the girls will despise you; and I would not have you to be hated and despised for a great deal. It is a thousand times easier to keep a good name when we have it than to regain it when it is once lost. I will feel myself richly repaid for my trouble and expense in sending you to college if you will act in such a way as to win the confidence of your associates and teachers.

Avoid all contentions and quarrels. Don't be a tale bearer, telling what such a one said about such a one. You will make both of them your enemies. Do not meddle with the quarrels of others; be friendly with all if possible. Don't break any of the rules of the college. If you should be betrayed into a violation of any of them, be sure to confess it when called to account. Do not try to deceive. Be a girl of truth.

Say your prayers and read your Bible. Do your part promptly in keeping your room fixed.

Jeannette and Wilbur started to school to Miss Emma Tuesday. Wilbur says he likes to go very well. The pain James had in his ankle has moved up to his knee. All of us are tolerably well.

We had corn soup for dinner to-day, and we all liked it very well.

Your affectionate

PAPA,

And here is a peep into the parsonage and a picture of the little things that made up the daily life when the children were young:

PITTSBORO, N. C., August 10, 1850.

*My Dear Daughter:* Your mamma received a letter from you by yesterday's mail, which we were all quite anxious to read. We are always glad to hear from you and hope that you will write as often as you can.

Perhaps you would like to know where we all are. Well, I am in the parlor, your mamma is in her room holding what she thinks is the greatest of little babies [the reference is to Henry Augustus, the youngest]. James is in his room studying Cæsar, for he is going to Mr. Harris again. Jeanette is in her room studying, for she will study some at home, though Miss Emma does not require it of her. Wilbur and Charles are asleep. Wilbur got a whipping this morning. He got mad with Nettie at the schoolhouse and came off before school, crying along the street, and his mother whipped him for it. He wished, no doubt, that he had not come home. He won't come home crying again!

I wish you to buy fruit whenever you need it. I think fruit that is sound and ripe is quite healthy. Health is a great blessing, and I want you to do whatever is promotive of your health. Very few girls set the proper value upon it and take due pains to preserve it. I hope that while you attend to your studies so as to fall behind no girl in the class you will also attend carefully to your health so as to have as good health as any of them. For our health is to a great extent in our own hands.

I want my daughter to be one of the best girls in college.

Your

PAPA.

The following letter to Wilbur, when a student at



Trinity College, is of especial interest.\* He was then seventeen years of age and had entered the Freshman class at this college only three weeks before this letter was written.

LUMBERTON, N. C., January 23, 1872.

*Dear Wilbur:* Yours of the 20th inst. came to-day with a letter from Charles to Augustus. We are all highly delighted to get letters. I am glad that you have got full employment. Try to be quick and thorough in your studies. Let none go ahead, if you can help it, but avoid the bane of envy toward a rival. I took up, as I now believe, a false notion when I was in college, that promotion and distinction were dangerous to religion. If one allows bad feelings against a competitor to arise, it will no doubt destroy all the healthful points of aspiration after distinction. Again, if aspiration becomes so intense as to absorb the time and thought which belong to the interest of the soul and encroach upon our devotions, then aspiration becomes dangerous. But very few accomplish much without aiming high.

---

\*The name given to this son was a result and expression of the admiration of John Tillett for the character of Dr. Wilbur Fisk, the first president of Wesleyan University, Middletown, Conn., who when elected to the office of bishop by the General Conference of 1836 declined this high and coveted honor, saying that he could serve the kingdom of Christ more effectively in the work of Christian education in which he was engaged than in the episcopal office. This act of modest and conscientious self-renunciation on the part of a bishop-elect was at that time without a precedent. In 1908 this University conferred upon this namesake of its first president the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity.

In the meantime, don't be discouraged by temporary failures and blunders nor ridiculed out of your high aims. One's future destiny is in most cases blocked out at college.

Don't be discouraged at what will at first appear to be utter incapacity for public speaking. I never shall forget the first effort of James Hardy, my classmate, in the Debating Society. It seemed to be an utter failure. But he had made up his mind to brook every difficulty in his way, and, though he died early, he became highly distinguished, and if he had lived would doubtless have been one of the leading men of the country.

You will doubtless at times be much troubled about your want of religious enjoyment. Sincere Christians are frequently greatly dissatisfied with their spiritual condition. Be ready to take your part in all religious exercises. Avoid those college wits who manage to be entertaining and popular without studying and attending to daily duties.

I have been nearly around my circuit. Am going into the Lowery region to-morrow.\* I have five churches in that region. One of my stewards was shot at by men who called themselves Lowery men a few nights ago. They did not aim to kill him, but to scare him away from where they were trying to get his cotton.

I went by mistake into the house of a brother of Henry Berry Lowery last Monday. His name is Perdue. He has nothing to do with his brother, Henry Berry. Perdue is well thought of in the neighborhood.

I am highly pleased with my circuit and am getting along thus far as well as I ever did on any circuit.

Your affectionate

PAPA.

---

\*Henry Berry Lowery, a notorious bandit and outlaw, was terrorizing that part of the county at this time.

Through an active ministry of forty-six years John Tillett never received more than twelve hundred dollars a year, and not that much except in a few rare instances.

For a man with a salary ranging from five hundred to twelve hundred dollars a year to keep a horse and buggy, provide food and clothing for his family and some good books and periodicals, which to him were as essential as food and raiment, and then pay the bills for his sons and daughters at boarding schools and colleges—all this required rigid economy on the part of every member of the family. Giving six children college education kept the parsonage keyed to economy for many years. But all this was done and no debts left unpaid. Some of his letters at this point are illuminating. Two or three are worthy of especial note. The first two following were addressed to his son Charlie at the Webb School, then located at Culleoka, Tennessee, but later moved to Bellbuckle, Tennessee:

YANCEYVILLE, N. C., May 27, 1874.

*My Dear Charlie:* I enclose twenty-five dollars, which I hope will relieve you in some degree. If you wish to continue at Culleoka, I will assume your expenses at least for the next session. You will see from the note that I inclose to Brother Webb that I request him to let you have what money you need to come home on, if you wish to come. I am doubtful about your going down into Robeson County at this season. I have no liking for it as a place to live. Besides, the places

that you speak of are already occupied by ——. I have no doubt that you could fill the places better than they are filled, as neither of the boys is steady in business—so I suppose at least, from what I have heard of them.

I got a letter from Wilbur by the same mail that brought yours, asking for money. I sent him thirty-five dollars yesterday. I shall also send Augustus five. I intended to send him ten, but concluded to send you twenty-five instead of twenty, as you may need it worse. I got a letter from Augustus and Nettie each yesterday, and one from Nettie the mail before. Augustus is improving, I hope. He gave me an interesting account of the closing of the session of the school last Thursday. He expressed a wish to engage in some business to assist in paying his board.

I do not wish him to be too closely confined during vacation. The mind needs relief from study. I don't approve of students engaging in laborious business during vacation. There is little or nothing gained by it in the end. Light and cheerful employment would not be amiss.

It is too late for me to afford you any aid in your debate. Besides, I doubt the propriety of relying on anybody but ourselves. For the object is to show what we are ourselves, though it is highly proper to read on the subject and to talk with intelligent persons. Rely upon yourself and remember that what you say, though it may appear small to you, yet may be more highly estimated by others. And even failures are sometimes an advantage in arousing the mind. Write soon.

Your affectionate

PAPA.

YANCEYVILLE, N. C., December 15, 1874.

*My Dear Charlie:* I send you five dollars for Christmas. I sent Mr. Wilkes a draft for forty-five dollars, leaving a

balance of fifteen dollars on the board up to December 25. James (whom I saw at Conference) said that he had sent you money. Let me know how much is now due and how much you need. I am assured of getting money for rent on January 1, 1875, when it is due. I wish to pay Mr. Wilkes all that is due.

We had the most delightful Conference I ever attended. Bishop Marvin appears to be the most thoroughly consecrated man I ever saw. He seems to possess the fullness of the Divine blessing.

I have some idea of sending Augustus to Mr. Horner at Hillsboro if I can see how I can meet the expenses. I saw Mr. Horner at Oxford, and he said that he took ministers' sons at half price. I do not know whether or not he meant board as well as tuition. But from the drift of his conversation at the time I am in hopes that he did mean board also. If Mr. Horner can get Augustus to apply himself, I shall expect great things of Augustus, as he evidently has mind enough to make a man.

We are all very well and always glad to hear from you.

Your affectionate

PAPA.

*Dear Nettie:* I have written a note to Brother Webb in my last letter to Charlie, assuming his expenses, provided Charlie wishes to stay, but requested him to become responsible for his board for the present. I think that I shall be able to meet all necessary expenses for the session, especially if you and Laura can manage to take care of Augustus. And I hope that I can send some assistance even in that event. We are living so economically that I can save a good deal more than heretofore. We are entirely clear of the expense of a cook, and we have neither of us bought any clothes of consequence as yet,



I don't believe they are all satisfied with our humble style of living, but I hear of no complaints.

I hope for good times.

Your affectionate

PAPA.

These letters are introduced simply to show how closely and carefully John Tillett had to manage his finances in order to give his children an education.

In writing of the educational policy of his father as it applied to his own household, Dr. W. F. Tillett says:

He let his children know that this was all that he could ever give them—a Christian education. He would loan us some money after we had received all that he could spare us for our education, so that we might go on further than he could take us. But it was with the understanding that we were to pay back in time to help the next younger child. He encouraged us to work and save all we could that we might get the best education possible over and beyond his ability to supply us with funds.

In no way did he exercise greater wisdom in our education than in selecting a good, though expensive, preparatory school, when a cheap one could easily have been found near by.

Such was the policy of this Methodist circuit rider who, out of the meager annual stipend of a few hundred dollars, gave six children, four sons and two daughters, a college education. His example is worthy of emulation and of unqualified approval by all who appreciate the highest and best things of life and are wise in the training of their children.



But the care and the training of his children were not limited to the selection for them of the best schools and colleges. For he exercised the same wisdom and conscientious concern in all other respects. When away from home, as his letters show, he followed them with fatherly counsel, and when at home he inculcated high ideals, enforced a rigid discipline, and taught them industry and frugality.

One summer, while living at Oxford, he rented four acres of ground for the boys to cultivate in corn. The circuit rider, who possibly knew a great deal more about raising boys than he did about raising corn, remarked at the time: "They may not make much corn, but it will provide heathful exercise and serve to keep the lads out of mischief during vacation."

His letters in 1878, and through after years, when no longer subjected to the financial pressure and other responsibilities incident to the schooling of his children, are characterized by a different tone and furnish other windows to the inner chambers of his soul.

The few selected letters offered in the following pages are addressed to his daughter Laura—a brilliant, ambitious young woman, idolized by her father, if such a thing was possible for a man with whom conscience at all times was enthroned. This highly gifted and remarkably intellectual young

woman was at the height of her usefulness and of her fame as a teacher in Rockingham, North Carolina, when death overtook her on Good Friday, 1881:

CARTHAGE, N. C., October 28, 1878.

*My Dear Laura:* If I had realized that Professor L—— proposed to come to Carthage to see me, I would certainly entertain him at any reasonable disadvantage. Still it would be a sore mortification for a man of his cloth to come to such a place expressly to see such an ignoramus as I am. He has been shown the wrong type by somebody. If he admires your brilliancy so much that he wants to see your father, I am surprised that he ignores the world's theory in matters of native talent.

I thought that everybody had come to attribute native talent in children to their mother and not to their father at all. I thought my children held that theory very firmly. But whatever theory may be adopted, I could not anticipate a visit on the ground of my importance. The little modest daisy looks well enough among the weeds and the briers, but bring it by the side of some floral splendor, and it creates contempt.

While I rejoice at the reputation you are making with such men, I would have you absorb within yourself all the glory, and I am not willing to be counted a factor in the problem. Nevertheless, if Professor L——or any one else comes at any time expressly to see me, however much mistaken and disappointed he may be in the object of his visit, he shall be entertained to the very best of my ability.

Wilbur has had his eyes examined and learns that he was in great danger of losing his eyesight, but hopes the crisis is now past. He can't study much for the present, but he is going

## 162 *The Iron Duke of the Methodist Itinerancy*

to stick to Princeton.\* I suppose he can hear lectures. To me the prospect before him is rather discouraging. But I have given myself and my children to God with willingness for any and all of us to suffer whatever is necessary to wean us from the world and to fit us for heaven. My prospect for heaven is brightening, I trust, as I approach the eternal world. I intend by the help of God to keep myself in daily and hourly readiness for the fast-approaching event.

I am still engaged in protracted meetings and shall probably continue up to Conference.

Your affectionate

PAPA.

CHARLOTTE, N. C., November 29, 1878.

*My Dear Laura:* I promised to write you if I got any intimations about my appointment. Dr. Burkhead asked me this morning how I would like to go to Bladen, the circuit that Brother Shell had last year, or this year as we may say. It is on the Wilmington District, and the parsonage is about fifteen or twenty miles from Fayetteville. I raised no objection except to the climate, stating that the low country had not agreed with me heretofore. He and Brother Shell say that the parsonage is located in Blockersville, which is a healthy place. I dislike it also on the ground that I am afraid that it would be unsafe for the children to visit me during their vacation. All that low country is healthy enough during the winter.

The matter is not at all fixed as yet, but I suppose it would be if I withdrew all objections. I do not feel uneasy about

---

\*Wilbur had just returned to Princeton Theological Seminary for his second year's work. He had spent the preceding summer vacation preaching on the old Boydton (Va.) Circuit, at the close of which he had a painful attack of iritis, from which he was now slowly recovering.

my appointment, as I consider my race pretty well run and my expenses will be much less than they have been, so that I could certainly get along. I certainly will not interpose any objections. I told all the presiding elders whom I talked with that I felt a trembling delicacy in touching the ark of the itinerancy lest evil befall me for undue interference. Let us all submit the whole matter to the Lord. It may be best for us to become weaned from each other before the final separation.

Dr. Fitzgerald, the editor of the Nashville *Christian Advocate*, put in his appearance this morning and in a few words won all hearts. He was dressed in North Carolina jeans, not black at that, and looked to all intents and purposes like a good-looking local preacher from the back country.

Dr. Alpheus W. Wilson, the Missionary Secretary, spoke also with fine effect.

Your affectionate

PAPA.

“I felt a trembling delicacy in touching the ark of the itinerancy!” Note this eloquent declaration of an itinerant Methodist preacher who for forty consecutive years has taken the marching orders of his Church. This loyalty and obedience on the part of her ministers has been from the beginning of the Church’s history the explanation of Methodism’s most signal victories.

It seems a pity that Bishop O. P. Fitzgerald’s biographer failed to get Mr. Tillet’s picture of him clad in “North Carolina jeans” when he visited the Charlotte Conference in 1878 and put up an appearance akin to a “local preacher from the back country”—a good looking preacher, to be sure!

How this North Carolina-born editor-bishop would have enjoyed this reference to himself if he could have come across it before he died! He later became a very near neighbor and a very dear friend of the son, whose home was in Nashville on the Vanderbilt University Campus.

A letter to Laura, June 26, 1878, indicates that Rev. John Tillett, the rugged, plain-spoken Methodist preacher whose ministry was given almost wholly to the yeomanry of North Carolina, had in him the very finest appreciation of the cultural life. He would doubtless have become a devotee of the fine arts if circumstances had permitted such a thing.

Another letter shows that he could detect the humor hidden away in boyish pranks, particularly in Charlie's long hike to save railroad fare! Here is the letter in question:

September, 1879.

*Dear Laura:* Yours of the 22d came Monday or Tuesday. I am delighted to learn that you are having such a splendid time. I rejoice at the advantages and intellectual feasts that you are enjoying. It certainly must be exhilarating to find one's self in the midst of cultured, progressive spirits who show the mellow fruits born of aspirations now stirring within us. I have one fear as to the result of the high privileges you enjoy, and that is that you will be caught up by this tide of development and progress and borne above the ideas of the patrons of your school so far that only a few will be



able to appreciate things on the new and improved style. Yet I rejoice in these things.

I have a postal from Charlie announcing his plan to walk from Petersburg to Randolph-Macon. He and his foot-companion, Gray Carroll, will cut a figure. I hope they will not be taken up for vagrants. How things run around in a circle! When I wanted him to walk home from Hillsboro he thought I had run almost crazy with old-fogyism. Now he starts out as quietly as if that had been his notion all his lifetime. Indeed, if he has to pay his bills along the way, the trip will cost more than the cars.

Write as often as you possibly can and tell Augustus to let down his etiquette a little and give me at least a line or two.

Your affectionate

PAPA.

CYPRESS CREEK, N. C., December 12, 1879.

*My Dear Daughter:* I got home from Conference Tuesday at 2:30 P.M., it being the shortest session ever held by our Conference since its organization, and yet everything was duly and well considered.

Charlie was there in the interest of the Duncan Monument Fund, but did not accomplish much, there being an unwillingness to give him a showing before the Conference.

He was assigned a good home and enjoyed himself very much. The young ladies where I stayed all fell in love with him and tried to keep him from returning so soon. Dr. Bennett, the President of Randolph-Macon College, said to me, I had reason to be proud of my sons.

Bishop Wightman seems to be bearing his best fruit in his old age. He was master of the situation. I had only a short conversation on the cars coming home. He is quite communicative. He commends in the highest terms the Woman's Missionary Movement. His wife has organized,



I think he said, about seventy Societies. They take up no public collections and have no men present at their meetings except the pastor at the organization.

If they go into it at Rockingham, don't decline to take part. It is no compromise of female modesty and refinement.

You have Brother Hudson for your pastor. He is one of our best and most intelligent men.

Your affectionate

PAPA.

The social, industrial, and political status of woman within the last few decades has experienced a change that is little short of revolutionary. Forty years ago John Tillett, wise father that he was, advised his daughter, at that time teaching in the town of Rockingham, North Carolina, to join the new Missionary Movement among the women of her Church and at the same time assured her that to join and take part in the Woman's Missionary Society would be "no compromise of her womanly modesty and refinement," although evidently, in the minds of some of those "called to be saints," it was clearly out of harmony with the Pauline injunction that the women should keep silent in the churches.

But notwithstanding the status of woman and the attitude of the public mind toward her, as to her rights and privileges in those not far-distant days, she now enjoys equal laity rights in the Methodist Churches, and, wonderful to tell, she has recently become a full-fledged citizen of these United States

of America. Furthermore, in spite of the dire results predicted by the prophets of evil, if the fatal day of her emancipation should arrive, the ark of God abides in safety, and neither the ballot box nor woman herself has yet suffered on account of her larger responsibility.

John Tillett in public life was known everywhere as the man of iron. He was as brave as a lion. Moral courage proved to be an inexhaustible asset of his sterling manhood. With an unswerving obedience he walked in the commandments of his God. He stood foursquare to every wind that blew, turned neither to the right hand nor the left, and regardless of cost walked straight ahead. In Church administration he was, as already pointed out, a strict disciplinarian. This was true in his home as well as in the administration of the affairs of the Churches over which he served as the under-shepherd.

Mr. Henry Augustus Tillett, the youngest son of John Tillett, a lawyer residing at Abilene, Texas, in giving recollections of his father, presents an interesting picture and gives striking proof of how this stern preacher of righteousness, whose uncompromising ethical ideals were so often proclaimed from the pulpit, preached the same gospel and enforced the same standards within his own family circle. He says:

## 168 *The Iron Duke of the Methodist Itinerancy*

My father's absolute and uncompromising honesty, that went to the very heart of things, impressed itself more deeply on me than perhaps any other trait of his character; and he squared his own life by those exacting rules which he preached to others.

I particularly recall an incident in my own life that finely illustrates his character in this respect and the manner in which he imparted his ideals to his children. When I was only fifteen years old and a student at the Bingham School, I went security for an old fellow who was hauling wood to the boys, to enable him to buy a wagon which he very much needed. I remember how puffed up I felt when I signed a note with him for \$85.50, the fellow telling me that Mr. White, the merchant, said that if I would go his security he would let him have the wagon on credit. I did so, and the following September the note fell due, and I had forgotten all about it. The fellow, after getting the wagon, absconded without paying anything and was never thereafter located.

I wrote my father about what had occurred and expected to be called home probably. Instead, however, he wrote me that, while I had played the fool very thoroughly in signing that note, there was but one thing left for me to do, and that was to pay that note if it took me all the balance of my life to do it. It took me over four years to pay that note, paying a dollar of my earnings and savings at a time. When I had finally completed the payment of the principal, Mr. White bragged mightily on me and told me he did not want me to pay any interest, though the note called for six per cent per annum. I sent the note to my father in evidence that I had fully and finally wiped out that debt, but he returned the note to me, commending me for what I had paid, but insisting that the note called for "six per cent per annum from date until paid," and could be said to have been paid only when the

interest was paid in full; and he directed me, if I wanted to be a *real man*, to send the note back to Mr. White to keep until I had paid that interest in full. Amid blinding tears I returned the note to Mr. White, and with added years of doing odd jobs to earn stray dollars to apply to the payment of that interest I finally got it all paid. I thereupon took a solemn oath, kissing the Bible, that I would never again go security for any man, and from that day to this I never have. My father's position taught me, as nothing else could have done, the sacredness of a contract and of one's obligations to meet it when once made. As a result of this experience and the lesson learned, I have through all my life not only faithfully performed my own contracts to the letter, but have taught my children to do the same and have also as a lawyer always insisted that my clients do likewise. I still have no patience with any man who will not spill his blood, if need be, in an effort to keep his contract. I could more easily pay ten thousand dollars now than I could pay that note for \$85.50 then. My father insisted that I could not be a real man and a Christian gentleman unless I paid that note, with interest. It was an immensely valuable lesson to me all through life.

There are lots of funny things also that come to me as I think of my father in connection with our home life. Things like this, for instance, to mention only one: Once, when we lived in Oxford, our cow got out of the lot, and we were looking everywhere for her, when my father looked out of the window and spied a cow in the street which he said was ours, though I insisted it was not ours, and he told me to drive the cow into our lot. He spanked me for my tardy obedience and for disputing his word by insisting that it was not our cow. I shall never forget his chagrin when the calf refused to go to the cow, but it was not until the cow proceeded to horn the

calf that he would let me turn her out of the lot. He never said a word.

This last sentence raises the question as to whether the preacher was altogether a "good sportsman," and whether he knew how to take a joke on himself as well as he did to start what turned out to be jokes on others; for his very plain preaching oftentimes placed individual offenders whom he described in his sermons in such a predicament (the audience knowing generally exactly who was referred to) that his unique description of the sin and the sinner followed the person referred to for a long time and became a sort of standing joke on him in the community—as, for example, when he described a certain young professor and steward who would attend dances and card parties, but was himself too pious to dance or play cards, as a man like unto Peter who "warmed himself at the enemy's fire." But whether John Tillett enjoyed a joke on himself or not, it is very certain that he had a keen appreciation of the humorous side of life, and few people enjoyed an anecdote that excited laughter more heartily than he did. Many a winter evening around the home fireside was made memorable to the children by the manner in which the different members of the family circle told of the funny things that had occurred in the family history, and no one con-



tributed more largely and heartily to this "children's hour" than did the father.

But no incident of family history perhaps could be told that illustrates more strikingly the stern honesty in character and in business which characterized John Tillett than the incident referred to above by his son in connection with the payment of that note. Many would doubtless agree with the merchant in thinking that a fifteen-year-old schoolboy who pays the principal of a security note, signed in generous, though ill-advised, sympathy for a poor old workingman, ought to be released from the payment of any and all interest, and would even say that a merchant who would allow a fifteen-year-old boy to sign a promissory note for the amount named—and this in the absence and without the knowledge of his father—scarcely had a right to demand the payment even of the principal; and feeling thus, they would not agree with the position taken by the father with his son, that he could not regard himself as a real man and a Christian gentleman unless he paid both the principal and the interest. But, be this as it may, the incident illustrates splendidly the stern honesty that entered into every fiber of John Tillett's nature and characterized both his practice and his preaching of ethics in business. We cannot have "Iron Dukes," either military or



ministerial, without some stern qualities besides courage getting into their make-up.

John Tillett had a conscience for himself and his own conduct first and then for others. Some one facetiously defined conscience as "one man's rule for another man's conduct"—very conscientious as to how the other man acts! John Tillett put his ethical ideals into practice first on himself and in his own home and then preached them to others. But he believed a preacher to be a prophet of God whose business it was to have a conscience for others, for the community in which he lives, as well as for himself—and so he cried aloud and spared not when he saw things going wrong in the community where he lived.

"It is through the quickening of some intelligent and well-balanced individual conscience," says a recent writer, "that a demoralized public conscience is to be awakened and rectified. The leadership of the public conscience has ever been given to the chosen prophets to whom the word of the Lord came with power. In order to lead safely and sanely one needs to be not only justified and reënforced by the divine, but needs to be genuinely human, and to become, in proof of his fitness for leadership, not less, but more and more human. The prophet's conscience is set for a beacon and a sign; it is in some individual reformer's soul that the moral conscious-

ness and conscience of an age have to be concentrated and brought to a burning focus. It is in the flaming forth of the prophet's passion for righteousness that the public conscience finds its first expression; and it is from the illuminated conscience of the Lord's prophets that the light is turned on that reveals the depth and the darkness of widespread sin and the need of reformation. Every town and village needs intelligent men and women who shall be for the community a kind of conscience within the public conscience; who are quick to discover and bold to proclaim any and every moral danger." Thus writes Newman Smyth in his "Christian Ethics."

It would be difficult to find among modern preachers and prophets a man who met more fully than did John Tillett the qualities and conditions of moral leadership here described.

But with it all he had a tender, loving heart. An excerpt from a letter of his to his daughter Laura gives the reader a glimpse into the inner sanctuary of his affections, a holy place closed for the most part to even those nearest him. After urging his dear daughter to cultivate a religious experience of which she might speak with a joyful confidence on any occasion and in every presence, he continues:

I shall never forget how the precious jewel of God's love blazed out beautifully when your dear mother spoke of its flames in her heart. Rockingham is to me a mournful spot,

but one that can never be forgotten.\* Your mother appeared to me in a dream some few weeks after she died, the most beautiful and lovely being that my eyes ever saw. She was surpassed in the beauty and symmetry of her Christian character by no one that ever lived in all that region. May God help you, so much like her in intellect, to be like her in Christian purity and moral beauty.

In the preceding pages letters have been produced that tell their own story of a man "who ruled well his own household." His devotion to wife and children increased, if possible, with the passing years, and to his children were given religious and educational advantages second to none. He had to figure closely to make ends meet, but not in a single instance did he express a desire to be rich. On the contrary, he did emphatically declare that rich men's sons had a poor chance in life. He was proud of his children and rejoiced in the consciousness that he had been repaid a thousandfold for all the sacrifices made in their behalf.

In a word, the best part of this circuit rider's life was hidden away in the bosom of his family, and his highest and holiest service was not rendered in the pulpit, but in the parsonage.

---

\*The fact that her mother had died in Rockingham and was buried there explains this reference—which would have been all the sadder could the writer have known that in less than two years from the time this letter was written the daughter here addressed would also die in this same town (on Good Friday, 1881) and be buried beside her mother.

Up to the present juncture, this story of parsonage life has suffered on account of a manifest and grave omission, an omission that must not longer be deferred, because she who for twenty-one years shared the toil and became a partner in every sacrifice of the Tillett household is in all respects worthy of equal if not greater honors than the father.

For the circuit rider's wife, battling with poverty in the meagerly furnished and uncomfortable parsonages where she sheltered as best she could her children, carried in her tender heart many a pang that her iron-blooded husband could never know. But she never faltered. She never even complained. "She looked well to the ways of her household, and ate not the bread of idleness." As with the mother of Samuel, industry and piety walked hand in hand with her. The little gardens for summer vegetables and the little garments for her children became the objects of her care. To the six sons and three daughters that she bore, her knees were altar stairs and her motherly heart became a shrine. "Her children rise up and call her blessed."

"The heart of her husband did safely trust her." In a letter to his wife in 1854, just a little while before the birth of her son Wilbur, when she was on a visit to her mother, Mrs. James Wyche, in Henderson, North Carolina, her husband writes: "Your garden seems to be grieving at your absence, as

well as myself. The squash vines are declining and dying. Indeed, the garden is a dull spot just now."

While not so stated in the letter, the inference is that, with her absent, the whole place is a dull spot to her husband.

Mrs. Eliza Wyche Tillett was just as fully devoted to the welfare of her children as was her husband. She stood with him in every effort to give them superior educational advantages, and in all their enforced economical administration of household affairs she was easily leader. The public ministry of Mr. Tillett was an unbroken record of conscientious devotion to his task, and to the end of her life, in 1862, the wife of his youth and early manhood became the perpetual inspiration of his ministry.

"She opened her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue was the law of kindness. She stretched out her hands to the poor; yea, she reached forth her hands to the needy."

Her oldest son, James, was absent from home, a soldier in the Confederate army, at the time of her death.

In the latter part of 1863, his home being then at Roxboro, John Tillett was married a second time, his second wife being the sister of his first wife, Mrs. Louisa Yancey Speed. Mrs. Speed who had one child, a son (named David) at the time of her marriage to Mr. Tillett, was the widow of an honored



and useful practicing physician who had died several years before. After many years of loving and faithful service to and with her husband this modest, gentle woman and loving wife, by whom he had no children, died at Thomasville, North Carolina, April the fifth, 1889, and was buried there. Mr. Tillett had moved to this place in 1886 after retiring from active service and being given a place in the ranks of those who in the parlance of Methodism are designated as superannuates and worn-out preachers. He lived quietly, and as comfortably as the increasing infirmities of age would permit, in the beautiful and healthful village of Thomasville until the death of his wife, after which sad event he lived for about a year in the home of his daughter Nettie (Jeannette) wife of Rev. Thomas J. Allison, a Presbyterian minister, at that time pastor of the Presbyterian Church located in the quiet village of Elmwood, Iredell County, North Carolina, and later with his son Charles W. Tillett, a lawyer living in Charlotte, in whose home, after a suffering sojourn of only a few weeks, he died.

Possibly this is the best place to introduce an incident that gives a peep into this itinerant preacher's home life different from anything yet narrated. It is an incident that will take us both backward and forward—back to the "Old South" and the days of slavery and forward into the "New South"



of to-day which rejoices not only that slavery is a thing of the past, but that the children of those who were once slaves now enjoy, along with the children of those who were once slave owners, the privileges of American citizenship, chief among which are the advantages of Christian education.

AN IMPRESSIVE INCIDENT—LOOK-  
ING BACKWARD AND FORWARD



## X

### AN IMPRESSIVE INCIDENT—LOOKING BACKWARD AND FORWARD

WE have already made incidental mention of John Tillett's loyalty to the South during the Civil War, his oldest son, James Wyche Tillett, being a soldier in the Confederate army from the beginning to the end of the war. But it should also be stated that he was in the first instance opposed to secession with its appeal to arms. He favored the South remaining in the Union and believed that there was a wiser way to settle all points involved in the dispute between the North and the South than civil war. But being a loyal democrat, he abided by the decision of the majority and stood by his own people and his own section of the country. In a democracy, majorities, whether they be wise or unwise, rule.

John Tillett became a slave owner first in his early youth, as we have seen, by inheritance from his father of a slave named Ben, who was, it seems, sold by his guardian soon after the father's death. Later in life, after his marriage, he, again became a slave owner though his wife.

It was quite common in ante-bellum days for parents to give a daughter entering into married

life a slave as part of her marriage dower, and this was deemed all the more desirable if the young husband did not himself own slaves. As Mr. Tillett found the institution of slavery in both the Old and the New Testament, with no condemnation of it by the inspired writers, he felt that it was not so much a sin to be condemned as it was a social evil to be borne with, mitigated, and ultimately removed. The problem that he immediately faced, however, was not the discussion of the abolition of slavery as a social institution, but rather of mitigating the attendant evils of the institution, of exerting his influence upon the owners of slaves to induce them to treat their slaves in a kind and Christian manner. He believed that the time should and would come when the working out of the principles and the spirit of Christianity would set all men free. In the meantime he both practiced in his own home and preached from the pulpit the duty of treating slaves in a humane and Christian manner. His courageous and continued insistence upon this resulted in making enemies of many slave owners who were guilty of the inhumanities which he found in many communities and which he fearlessly condemned.

The reaction against slavery has become in our day so strong and pronounced, so conscientious and humane, that some are in danger perhaps of being not altogether just in their judgment of those who

in a past generation were slave owners—in danger of remanding them not merely to a stage of Christian culture and enlightenment below that of the present day, but to a moral and religious status, that would discredit unduly and unfairly the high type of Christian character and Christian living that characterized many of those who were owners of slaves in the South before the Civil War. That the abolition of the system of slavery in America and elsewhere is an evidence of moral and social progress in our race is recognized nowhere more truly than in the former slave-holding States of America. But that we may be fair to the Southern slave-owner it is well for us to remember that “in the earlier days of our Republic slavery existed in New England and elsewhere in the North, and when the slave owners there, after due experiment, found slavery unprofitable because of rigorous climatic conditions and growing antipathy to the institution, they sold their slaves to the cotton planters of the South, and the sentiment against slavery thereafter rapidly developed throughout all the nonslaveholding States. Even Peter Faneuil, the founder of the ‘Cradle of Liberty,’ after whom the historic ‘Faneuil Hall’ of Boston, famous for its antislavery meetings and pronouncements, was named, was at one time a slave-trader. In the meantime it can be said—though it is no justification of the institution of slavery to say it—



that among all the millions of negroes in the world those who live in America to-day, taken as a whole, enjoy more of the comforts and blessings and privileges of life than those found in any other land. If the North as well as the South is responsible for this blemish upon our history, it is also true that the people of the South to-day no less than those of the North count it providential that slavery was long ago brought to an end and rejoice in the Providence that removed this moral incubus and obstacle to progress from the body politic of our nation.”\*

These words, quoted from the son of our “Iron Duke,” which point to the fact that back of and along with slavery in the South was slavery in the North, need to be supplemented and reënforced by others from an eminent English author which show that back of slavery in America were the slave-traders and slaveships of England. “Slavery,” says Dr. Robert F. Horton, “was to the Greek mind a law of nature. Aristotle had persuaded himself that some men were ‘naturally’ slaves. His conscience did not prick him when he defined tools as ‘lifeless slaves’ and slaves as ‘living tools.’ The Jewish law allowed slavery, though it forbade the permanent enslavement of a native Israelite. Christianity did not abolish slavery; it only claimed the

---

\*See “The Hand of God in American History,” by Wilbur Fisk Tillett.

equality of slave and master before God. The time was not ripe. Our great seamen, like Hawkins, carried slaves to America in ships which were named after Jesus. Nay, even in 1712, by the Assiento Contract in the Treaty of Utrecht, England secured the slave trade of the world. The treaty was celebrated by *Te Deums* for which Handel wrote the music.”\*

These historic facts connected with slavery furnish a background and a frame in which we may place the picture of this conscientious Christian master and slave owner of the Old South. Unless Methodism had adapted itself to the slave-holding conditions existing in the Southern States, there would have been no “Iron Duke of the Methodist Itinerancy” to write about to-day.

We cannot, perhaps, better bring out John Tillett’s attitude toward slavery and his practice in his own home of the ideals which he preached than by reproducing here the account of an incident that occurred in December, 1922, at the session of the Federal Council held in the city of Indianapolis.

The Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, it will be remembered, is composed of some thirty-five different religious denominations—that is, of well-nigh all the Protestant Churches, white and colored, in this country. There is perhaps no association of Christian Churches in the world so represen-

---

\*“Great Issues,” page 171.

tative of modern Protestant Christianity as this Federal Council, which has its headquarters in New York City and constitutes a kind of religious "clearing house" for the consideration of problems which are common to all the Churches. Not only many different Churches, but all the different races of people in this country who are found in these Churches, have their representatives in this large and cosmopolitan body of Christian people.

The remarkable and unique incident to which we refer excited deep interest and made a profound, impression upon the audience present, growing out of the fact that it furnished a striking instance of the kindly feeling existing between the white and colored races in the older generation whose memories go back to the days of slavery. Dr. W. F. Tillett, of Vanderbilt University, a son of John Tillett, who has been a member of the Council and a regular attendant upon the annual meetings of the Executive Committee almost from the beginning of the Council, arose under a request for personal privilege and, coming forward, addressed the Council in substantially the following words:

Before passing from the consideration of the subject of Christian education to the next subject on your program, I ask that I may be permitted to make a few remarks that are personal to myself and one other member of this Executive Committee who is present here this afternoon and whose work in life, like my own, has long been that of Christian education.

I am quite sure that the relationship that exists between me and this fellow member of the Council to whom I refer is one that does not exist between any other two members of this Executive Committee, and I am equally sure that this peculiar relationship will not likely ever again be duplicated in all the future history of the Federal Council. I allude to the fact that the son of a former Southern slaveholder and the son of one who was formerly owned by him in the days of slavery are together here in this room this afternoon as fellow members of this Federal Council and of this Executive Committee. The member of the Council to whom I refer is Prof. S. G. Atkins, the founder and the president of Slater State Normal College, of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, one of the most useful and successful of the institutions for the education of negroes in North Carolina.

My father, a Methodist preacher, and my mother were slaveholders, as most other people of their class in the South were before the close of the Civil War. Servants found necessary for work about the house were owned as slaves. But my father was everywhere recognized as a deeply conscientious and truly Christian master, a thing which I suppose some people would regard as an absolute impossibility, so incompatible do they regard being a Christian and the ownership of slaves. I remember distinctly how daily at the hour of family prayer the slaves that we owned were brought into our family room and how they sat listening with us children to the reading of the Bible and how they knelt with us at the family altar, and our father prayed for them just as he did for his own children. He looked after their needs and treated them always considerately and kindly. He believed that the time would come and should come when they would all be free, and he prayed for the coming of that day. Indeed, most Southern slaveholders, as I knew them in my childhood, were

## 188 *The Iron Duke of the Methodist Itinerancy*

far from being such odious characters as the slaveholders described in "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and those whose cruelties stirred the righteous soul of Whittier and inspired those pathetic and passionate poems which in turn stirred the souls of others. And never did the sermons of my Methodist preacher father flame out in denunciation of wrong more than when he preached against cruelties and outrages perpetrated by heartless slave owners on their helpless slaves.

Among the small number of slaves owned by my father and mother in my early childhood the one we thought most of and trusted most and loved best was named Allen Atkins. It is that man's son, born in the midst of the Civil War in the village of Haywood, North Carolina, who is here to-day as a member with you and me of this Executive Committee and as the honored representative of one of the Churches constituting this Council. He was educated at St. Augustine Normal and Collegiate Institute, at Raleigh, which is recognized as perhaps the best institution of its kind for the education of colored people that is conducted by the Episcopal Church in the South. Soon after graduating at this institute Mr. Atkins founded the institution at Winston-Salem, now some thirty years ago, of which he has always been the head and which is now the property of the State of North Carolina. The fact that the State should be willing to take over the property and retain Professor Atkins so long at the head of it is the highest possible compliment to the character of the school and to the executive ability and moral worth of its president. With this bit of information concerning his father and his own achievements, I am now going to ask President Atkins to come forward and let me present him to the Council.

As he came forward Dean Tillett extended his hand and said: "If thy heart is as my heart, give



me thy hand." Having shaken hands, as the two stood before the audience Dean Tillett said further:

President Atkins, I honor the memory of my father and am proud of my descent from him; but I want to say that I also honor and revere the memory of your father, Allen Atkins. He was a good and true man, and I congratulate you both on account of your descent from so good a man and also on account of your ascent in that you have risen from the conditions of poverty and obscurity in which you were born to a large and high place of influence in your race, and this you have done not by self-seeking, but by merit and by service to your race, your Church, and your native State. And when I think of these conditions that you have overcome and what you have accomplished, I feel that your achievement in life is greater than anything that I can claim to have done. If all the members of your race and mine could understand each other and feel toward each other as you and I do, there would, I think, be no race troubles between the black man and the white. It was one of my own former students, Dr. W. W. Alexander, who on yesterday spoke to the Council and showed us how much he and other leaders of both races are trying to do to promote and maintain right relations between the two races. I rejoice in the fact that you and I are both now free, for the emancipation of the negro race in this country meant also the emancipation of the white race; for as long as the incubus of slavery lasts the slaveholder and the slave are both in bondage and both are inevitably kept back from their highest and best racial development.

The worth and the greatness alike of individuals and of races depend not upon the color of the skin, but upon their culture, character, and service to mankind; and it is your lot and mine as educators of the young men and young women



## 190 *The Iron Duke of the Methodist Itinerancy*

of our respective races so to develop them in intelligence and moral character and capacity for efficient service that the white race and the black race shall each respect and serve the other and both together work in a Christian spirit and in a Christian way to make our country and our nation great, not only commercially, but morally and spiritually. Your father and mine were both alike willing bond servants of Jesus Christ while here in the flesh. They are together now in a land where both are free, and I can but think if they look down upon us from the glory land they rejoice to see their sons associated together in the freedom and fellowship of this Council and in the work of Christian education. Thanking the Chairman for giving me time to say these words about my father and yours and to express to you in this presence my high regard for you and the work you are doing, I pray God's blessing upon you and your people.

Prolonged applause followed these remarks as Dr. Tillett and President Atkins returned to their seats, and the applause did not cease until President Atkins was called back to the platform by the Chairman and requested to say something. His remarks, which were brief and delivered with modesty, were listened to with deep interest by the audience. He spoke as follows:

This is a gracious moment for me and one of hopeful suggestiveness for my race. The name of Rev. John Tillett was greatly honored and revered in the humble home of my childhood, and this gracious consideration of me and of my race by his son, Dean Tillett, is in line with my feeling that it is desirable to bring out the bright spots in this matter of race relations. There are, of course, many dark spots, many

things to discourage, but I believe in stressing the bright spots.

As a colored man and citizen of North Carolina, I recall that the first appropriation made by the State Legislature for a school for the special training of negro teachers in our State was the small sum of two thousand dollars. Our General Assembly two years ago appropriated nearly one million dollars for this same purpose, and we are hoping that our legislature which is soon to assemble will be actuated by a like spirit and make a like appropriation to carry forward the wise and liberal program now under way for the education of negroes in North Carolina. This spirit of liberality and good feeling is naturally the fruit of the fine and gracious sentiments expressed by Dean Tillett, and such a spirit is characteristic of the noble type of Southerner which he represents. It is this phase of this whole subject which I think should be most of all stressed at this time. To think of and bring out continually more and more the bright spots rather than the dark ones will tend to make the dark spots less dark and the bright spots in our race relationships more bright and more lasting.

I want to say in conclusion that I appreciate very much the consideration of Dean Tillett which he has manifested this day in this presence toward the son of the man who was once owned by his father.

The incident here narrated is described in the January, 1923, number of the Federal Council *Bulletin*, where the remarks of Dean Tillett and President Atkins are reproduced. Dr. S. M. Cavert, editor of the *Bulletin* and one of the General Secretaries of the Council, referred to the incident as "the most touching and impressive that he had ever

witnessed in any meeting of the Council or in any other public gathering."

But we must now return from this incident, which occurred more than thirty years after the death of John Tillett, and follow this humble but honored man of God through the closing years and experiences of his life. Let us trace now the lengthening shadows and see the clouds that gather when the day is done and the glow of sunset is on them.

XI  
LOOKING TOWARD THE SUNSET

13



## XI

### LOOKING TOWARD THE SUNSET

THE itinerant Methodist preacher after long years of service as "a good minister of Jesus Christ" comes down to old age occupying a place distinctly his own. Those who sing of his worth put a halo upon his brow and clothe him with garments of praise. But on the stern practical side of life the situation is altogether different. This veteran, if not relegated to the rear ranks, is transferred to a "silent sector," and fresh troops are ordered to the "active zone." Furthermore, when no longer able to render active service in the itinerant ranks, or, even before the arrival of that undesired period, after the strength and vigor of middle life have passed, the old minister is often left without a constituency who may know and appreciate him on account of former services.

The physician once established in his profession comes toward the end of his life intrenched in the confidence and affections of those to whom as a physician he has ministered in other years. The lawyer gathers about him the clients and friends who in after years, when not quite so vigorous and alert, become a big and valuable asset of his. But



the Methodist preacher transferred from one pastoral charge to another reaches old age with no such constituency as a man in a settled occupation comes eventually to enjoy.

The men and women and children with whom he spent his best days as a minister of the gospel and who would, if in touch with him, in some measure appreciate and minister to their former pastor on account of past services are in the time of his old age scattered here and there in a score or more of different localities.

Consequently the Methodist preacher brings nothing with him from preceding years of toil except his record, and that record is of little value unless, like the athlete on the baseball "diamond," he can maintain his "batting average."

Not only is the old preacher required, regardless of former services and past efficiency, to measure up to present demands, but he has been left without an adequate support in case of his superannuation. The Church flings a beggarly pittance to her disabled and worn-out veterans, while the United States government provides a bounteous pension for its soldiers and sailors.

In view of the treatment accorded the aged minister by his Church, the following letter from Brother Tillett, near the end of his long and faithful career, will find a sympathetic response in the heart

of every old preacher who may read it. The letter was written a week or so after Conference to the presiding bishop. Here is what he writes:

*My Dear Bishop:* I am considerably bothered at the idea of having two preachers assigned to a charge that paid only \$260 to the preacher last year. If that amount is to be divided between me and Brother King, our means of support will be very slim. Nevertheless, I shall go to it believing that you acted according to the best lights before you. As it is probable that Brother King is not a claimant upon the funds, I write merely to get relief from my embarrassment. If he is a claimant, I shall be glad to bring the matter before you, that, if possible, some change may be made. If, however, on consideration you see no relief in the case, then I shall go forward as I have always done, believing there will be grace offered as I have need.

Yours sincerely and affectionately,

JOHN TILLET.

Brother Tillett was laboring under a misconception in thinking that his salary was to be divided; for such was not the case. But the meager stipend and the spirit of the old veteran, even in case a division with Brother King should be made, carry with them a story that none can mistake.

With forty-five consecutive years of faithful service behind the man who is "bothered" over the prospect of dividing a salary of \$260 with another needy brother, yet with the express determination to "go forward as I have always done," this letter, that breathes a childlike faith and submission, becomes

sublimely eloquent. Its author deserves a place among the immortals.

The one outstanding event of the year in the life of the average Methodist preacher is the Annual Conference. As the ancient Jew returned to the great yearly feasts at Jerusalem, so do these itinerants go up to their annual gatherings. These Methodist preachers meet their comrades again, recount their victories, saying little of defeat, bring in reports of the past year, plan for the next, and as a climax to a joyous week receive their appointments for the ensuing year.

To the young man upon the threshold of the itinerancy, it is an occasion of rare inspirational value. To the aged itinerant it becomes a time especially for greeting old friends and for the renewal of old friendships.

Of interest at this point, and at the same time serving to illustrate the truth just stated, is a letter that Brother Tillett wrote his wife from the seat of the Conference a few years before he died. The letter is typical of the man in his old age. He was alert to everything going on about him, immensely interested in people, and at all times manifested a beautiful candor and simplicity. This letter describes how itinerant preachers, some of them at least, were "entertained" at Conference gatherings forty years ago. If any reader is disposed to criticize the author

for publishing a private letter such as this, we feel sure it will not be the itinerant preacher who has experiences in being "entertained" at Conferences or elsewhere after the manner here described. We omit all identification names and dates.

*My Dear Louisa:* I am very happily situated. Have a room and bed all to myself. The family is the one that generally gave me dinner when I went to the little church to preach on week days when we lived at Olin. They live in about the same style that they did then. The old man is seventy-eight years old and the old woman not much younger; indeed, she looks older than the old man. They have a single daughter, an old maid, and a son living with them. The son, a very clever young man, has a small foundry here. I was not their first choice, as I learned from Brother T. A——, who was appointed to assist Brother H—— to find homes for the preachers. I was the second choice, but I am glad that I got here. Brother F——, my fellow guest, is not here, and, if it suits him, I hope he will not come, as I would have to share the bed with him.

When I reached here last night after a difficult search to find the place, the appearances were entirely unfavorable. I went to bed in sheets not bleached, nor clean, and next morning saw that they were old and somewhat ragged. My feet got very cold before morning, the covering having no blanket and otherwise quite insufficient. I was anxious for the young man to come and make me a fire so that I might get warm. I felt pretty blue. But I found a heart to pray to God for grace to fit me for the occasion and to make it the best place for me and the family that I had ever had at a Conference, and I felt that the Lord was with me. I was called to breakfast a little before I got ready. I found every-

thing in the plainest of style. I enjoyed the good sausage, but the coffee was weak. I called for the Bible, and we had prayers at the table. I felt still better, and to make a long story close up, I am now more than pleased.

It is time for me to be at Conference, but I will write a little more.

Our Conference is moving on delightfully. There is a large attendance. The Bishop preached the Thanksgiving sermon yesterday. It was a grand success. He is quite an interesting man. He appears to be entirely at ease, almost as much so as Bishop Marvin.

I have seen a great many acquaintances who have searched me out. The first was Brother John S——. Sister S—— is here, but I have not yet shaken hands with her. I saw Sister B——. She sat near me at the Thanksgiving sermon. I ate supper at Perry T——'s last night. Met Les and Mag T—— there. But I cannot tell all now.

Robbers decoyed Brother S. V. H——, one of our pastors, into an out-of-the-way place last night, choked him, and took all of his Conference money, amounting to almost \$400. It has created a tremendous sensation.

My money is all handed over, and I have now but little left. I see nothing in the way of being sent back to the Alamance Circuit.

Affectionately,

JOHN TILLET.

P.S., 4 P.M.—Brother H——has received a note through the postoffice telling him where to find his pocketbook and papers, but no money. I have met with a great many friends who seem to be glad to see me. There is now no doubt of my being returned to Alamance Circuit.

J. T.

In November, 1884, Brother Tillett attended his forty-seventh consecutive session of the North



Carolina Conference—a most remarkable record—and it was his last. His first Conference was at Salisbury; his last at Wilmington. From the Wilmington Conference he received the appointment to his last pastoral charge, the Pleasant Garden Circuit, just south of Greensboro.

In a letter to his wife from Wilmington, while attending this his last Conference, the old circuit rider shows a deep interest in his prospective charge.

WILMINGTON, N. C., November 29, 1884.

*My Dear Louisa:* There is no doubt that we shall be read out for Pleasant Garden. The preacher that was there will be my successor on the Alamance Circuit. He has been in Conference only one year. He is said to be a pretty fair preacher. He is, I think, a graduate of Trinity College and a nephew of Professor Johnson at Trinity. He does not know, I suppose, where he is going, and I am not at liberty to talk to him about the parsonage till the appointments are read out. But then I expect to have a talk with him and find out as much as I can about the parsonage and circuit.

Charlie came this morning and stopped at Mr. Kingsbury's. I was there when he came, about half-after 8 o'clock. I ate dinner there to-day. They had a splendid dinner, and the family was cheerful and full of talk. Charlie hired a horse and buggy and took me over to the Sound this afternoon.

I think that we shall get our appointments Tuesday night and that I shall reach home Wednesday night. I think that I can arrange with Brother Johnson to stay at the shops as long as we want to if we want to stay a week or two. And if we want to move immediately we can do so.

Your affectionate

HUSBAND.





**XII**

**LAST DAYS OF THE IRON DUKE**



## XII

### LAST DAYS OF THE IRON DUKE

THEODORE ROOSEVELT, while President of the United States, paid the Methodist circuit rider the following tribute:

The Methodist Church plays a great part in many lands, and yet I think I can say that in none other has it played so great and peculiar a part as here in the United States. Its history is indissolubly interwoven with the history of our country for the sixscore years since the constitutional convention made us really a nation. Its essential democracy, its fiery and restless energy of spirit, and the wide play that it gave to individual initiative, all tended to make it peculiarly congenial to a hardy and virile folk. The whole country is under a debt of gratitude to the Methodist circuit riders, the Methodist pioneer preachers, whose movement westward kept pace with the movement of the frontier; who shared all the hardships in the life of the frontiersman, while at the same time ministering to his spiritual needs and seeing that his material cares and the hard and grinding poverty of his life did not wholly extinguish the divine fire within his soul.

Most aptly has Roosevelt, the great American, both President and historian, described the early Methodist circuit rider, and with equal accuracy has he estimated the character and value of his ministry.

Francis Asbury, with his genius for discipline and with the intrepid spirit of the pioneer, became the father of the itinerant ministry, as we have it in

American Methodism. He raised up a native ministry, inspired it with his spirit of sacrificial service, mounted it on horseback, and led to the conquest of a virgin continent.

The necessary restrictions and hardships of a pioneer people became the daily experience of the pioneer preacher. And these circuit riders, who feared not the tomahawk of the savage and who defied the storms of winter and gladly shared all the hardships of the early settlers in America, not only laid the foundations of Methodism in this Western world, but became effective as builders of an empire. Armed with Bible and hymn book, these knights of the saddlebags rode to conquests such as mailed warriors never dreamed of.

These men had upon them no vows of poverty, yet one of their favorite songs began:

"No foot of land do I possess,  
No cottage in this wilderness."

But, like the ancient patriarchs who dwelt in tabernacles, these Methodist circuit riders, prophets of righteousness and evangelists of the grace of God, looked for a city whose builder and maker is God.

One who saw the Methodist itinerancy at closer range and understood the itinerant preacher and his value to state and nation even better than did Theodore Roosevelt from whom we have just quoted has described the pioneer preacher and cir-

cuit rider of early Methodism in terms which are none the less true and accurate because they glow with rhetoric and burn with the passion of an orator whose eloquence met the demands of a great occasion. The following words are taken from the fraternal address of Dr. (later Bishop) John C. Kilgo, delivered before the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church which met at Los Angeles in 1904:

What a mighty man the itinerant was! Free from pompous pretense, unheralded by the blast of trumpets, lacking the credentials of earthly courts, without the equipage of wealth, not certified by lordly society, this man, the Methodist circuit rider, stands the peer of any man or set of men who helped to build this great republic. The desire and expectation of worldly gain did not mar his motives. He had no wish for social applause; he sought no indulgence at the hands of patronizing luxury and did not crave personal comforts; but, like a man upon whom rested the prophetic commission of the eternal throne, he went to his task as one bent on a desperate mission. Serenity was on his face, a heavenly radiance was in his eye, the tone of eternal authority was in his voice, and the strength of a divine inspiration steadied his step.

He obeyed the behest of Heaven and went everywhere, threading tangled wildernesses, climbing over wild mountains, and penetrating dense swamps; and wherever he went he delivered the word of God with miraculous power. He did not peddle indulgence to sensuous society, he made no concessions to popular evils, he softened no word of truth in order to promote his personal comfort, nor was he a mendicant



of any kind of worldly favors. He was a prophet sent of God, and the tone of Sinaitic thunder was in his words while he waged unceasing war against sin in all forms and in all places. He arbitrated no differences between righteousness and sin, between God and Satan, but proclaimed an eternal antagonism between them never to be adjusted by any other method than by the everlasting defeat of evil. He has left his record in an eternally established boundary which ecclesiastical diplomats of these last times seem to think extends far beyond the property rights of God and should be drawn in to suit the convenience and commerce of Satan.

In the very front rank of these iron-blooded itinerants who wrought with such dauntless heroism we place the lad that in his early years battled with poverty, as his seafaring ancestors had battled with tide and storm. In love with books when books were few, and dreaming of the best in education, which dream became the inspiration of his life, first for himself and later for his children, the youth from the backwoods of Camden County finally came to possess a college diploma, which in that day was well-nigh as difficult to obtain as the crown of a king. Thus equipped, this youth of high ideals entered the Methodist itinerancy to give half a century to the service of God and humanity. And in all that long term of service he never in a single instance failed to leave the impress of his life and his labors upon the community and the Churches where he served "as a good minister of Jesus Christ."

His ministry began twenty-one years before the outbreak of the Civil War and continued practically the same length of time beyond the close of that bloody conflict.

John Tillett, therefore, was in the midst of his ministerial life when the war came on, learned all about those terrible years and also about the eventful decade and more that followed. And there is no estimating what value to the Church and to society at large were the services of a minister like John Tillett through that period of lawlessness and moral chaos. He not only preached righteousness with the vigor of Amos of old, but he taught men respect for law by enforcing the statutory requirements of his Church and also by demanding that men everywhere live up to the legal standards which had been set for their observance. North Carolina shall ever be debtor to this matchless circuit rider, and universal Methodism shall continue to be blessed through the gift of his son, Dean Wilbur F. Tillett, of Vanderbilt University, for more than forty years the instructor of young gospel ministers who now grace that high calling in every part of the earth.

On the fourth Sunday in November, 1885, Mr. Tillett preached two funeral sermons, which were his last. That night he was taken violently ill with acute bronchitis. Typhoid fever developed, and he

never fully recovered from this attack, which lasted for weeks.

The Annual Conference met in Charlotte on Wednesday following his attack of Sunday night. Being ill at home, he could not attend Conference, which was the first session that he had missed in the long course of his itinerant life.

He was appointed by the bishop to the Pleasant Garden Circuit for another year, but did not recover sufficiently to take up his work. At the following Conference, in 1886, the name of John Tillett went to the roll of the superannuates and his remarkable career as an active itinerant came to a close.

Men about Pleasant Garden now who were boys in 1885, when Mr. Tillett closed his active ministry on that circuit, remember "Uncle Tillett" as a rugged, zealous old preacher, weighted down with the infirmities of age, but a mighty man in prayer and a powerful preacher.

In 1886 the superannuate moved from Pleasant Garden to Thomasville, North Carolina, where he dwelt in a modest home of his own till the death of his wife, in April, 1889. Following the death of his wife he lived one year with his daughter, Mrs. T. J. Allison, at Elmwood, North Carolina, where her husband was the pastor of the Presbyterian Church. In April, 1890, Mr. Tillett moved to Char-

lotte, North Carolina, where the remainder of his days on earth were spent in the home of his son, Hon. Charles W. Tillett, a prominent attorney of that city.

His life, from the time of his attack in November, 1885, to which reference has already been made, to the time of his death, almost five years later, was one of great bodily suffering. He never recovered from the prostration that accompanied and followed this serious illness. Yet he bore his suffering with great fortitude and in it all was patient, desiring above everything else that God should be glorified. "His peace was as a river, and his conscious acceptance with God through Jesus Christ and his joyful hope of heaven constituted for years his normal condition"—so wrote one who knew him well.

Dr. W. F. Tillett, who was with him for two weeks before his death, writes: "Never did any one long for and welcome death more eagerly than he. The future was as bright and clear to him as the noonday sun; death had not a single terror for him. The last passage of Scripture he was known to quote (and that to himself when he thought no one was near) was, 'Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, good will toward men.' This he repeated twice."

On July 17, 1890, with his sons Wilbur, Charles, and Augustus at his bedside, this noble old Roman,

whom we have called "The Iron Duke of the Methodist Itinerancy," died as he had lived, brave, courageous, unafraid. To him should be applied the familiar and triumphant words of the Apostle to the Gentiles, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith; henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness."

The body of this fearless and consecrated Methodist preacher rests in Elmwood Cemetery, Charlotte, North Carolina, and upon the granite shaft that marks his grave is inscribed,

REV. JOHN TILLET

BORN NOVEMBER 23, 1812

DIED JULY 17, 1890

FOR MORE THAN FIFTY YEARS AN ITINERANT PREACHER  
IN THE N. C. CONFERENCE OF THE METHODIST  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SOUTH.

"Servant of God, well done;

Rest from thy loved employ;

The battle fought, the victory won,

Enter thy Master's joy."

Lord Wellesley, the Iron Duke of England, after his achievements at Waterloo and on other fields of battle, was voted by Parliament an annuity of ten thousand pounds—fifty thousand dollars. This was afterwards changed to an outright gift of four hundred thousand pounds, to which was added later two hundred thousand pounds that he might purchase for himself and family a princely mansion



and estate where he could live in a manner befitting the military hero that he was. When he died they laid his body to rest with the highest possible military and civic honors underneath the dome of St Paul's Cathedral in London; and there, along with the body of Sir Christopher Wren, the architect and builder of this splendid temple which is the pride and glory of England, it awaits undisturbed the progress of human history and the achievements of the English nation which were made possible by his brilliant service on the field of battle. As the world counts greatness and gives its honors, there is no greater name in all human history than that of the Duke of Wellington, and it is impossible for a nation more highly to honor the name and memory of a son, a citizen, a soldier, than the English nation has honored and still honors its great "Iron Duke."

The "Iron Duke of the Methodist itinerancy" must be studied in contrast rather than in comparison with this mighty English man of war. There was "iron" in the blood and in the character alike of these two men. But military and moral heroes must needs be weighed in different scales. There are heroes of peace, who save and build, as well as heroes of war, who destroy and kill. "Every man," St Francis of Assisi once said, "is just so great as he is in the eyes of God—and no greater." And an even better and greater judge of greatness than St.



## 214 *The Iron Duke of the Methodist Itinerancy*

Francis has said that he that would be greatest among men must be servant of all—has said that loving, unselfish, altruistic, self-sacrificing service to the largest number of one's fellow men is the real measure and proof of true greatness. It is when judged by this standard and weighed in these scales that the "Iron Duke of the Itinerancy" is seen to be truly great in the eyes of God and right worthy to be numbered among earth's moral heroes.

When this man of mighty achievements in the Methodist ministry had made good and had won victories at not a few spiritual "Waterloos," the Church recognized and rewarded his splendid service by increasing his salary from two hundred and fifty dollars to five hundred dollars a year, and then later to seven hundred and fifty, and finally it reached the high-water mark of twelve hundred dollars a year—thereafter declining until it got back and down again to two hundred and sixty dollars a year. When he became a "worn-out superannuate," and they found he had no resources of his own, they placed him among those receiving the largest amount which was then awarded to any superannuate in his Conference—a stipend of something over two hundred, but never as much as three hundred dollars. And did any man ever hear him complain? Never once. In entering the itinerant ministry he had already counted the cost and had

taken its vows upon him—and these vows he interpreted as meaning that he must go cheerfully wherever sent and perform faithfully whatever work was assigned him and receive uncomplainingly whatever financial compensation was given him by the people whom he served. Here, in part at least, was the “hiding of his power.”

Nor was John Tillett alone in thinking and living and working as set forth in these pages. It is not because he stands out single and alone in his character and ministry, but rather because he furnishes a typical and ideal example of the itinerant Methodist minister of the nineteenth century taken at his best, that we have desired to tell Methodist preachers and laymen of this new day what manner of man he was. If virile and heroic qualities that entered into his character do not make it fitting to call him the “Iron Duke of the Methodist Itinerancy,” what then could?

Not underneath any stately dome like that of St. Paul's Cathedral, or in any consecrated crypt of Abbey like that of Westminster, where kings and high prelates sleep, does the body of this Methodist circuit rider rest, but, as is befitting so simple and unpretentious a servant of Jesus Christ and his Church, out under God's blue sky, the dome not made with human hands, in Elmwood Cemetery, in a grave unadorned save by a modest shaft of gray

granite, that tells the passer-by when he was born and when he died—there his body rests in the heart of the Southland that he loved and in the midst of men and women to whose fathers and grandfathers he preached a whole gospel, as he understood it, and kept back nothing.

That the memory of such a man as he was may not altogether perish from the earth these pages have been written; and we cannot think that any one who has read them will fail to recognize and approve the posthumous title which we have given to this stern, conscientious, heroic preacher of righteousness—"the Iron Duke of the Methodist Itinerancy." Peace to his ashes! All honor to his memory!





B  
Plyler

T576P

35769

The Iron Duke of the  
Methodist Itinerancy

DATE

ISSUED TO

June 15 '90

W. E. Brown

B

T576P

35769



Duke University Libraries



D02227448T

Duke University Libraries



D02227448T